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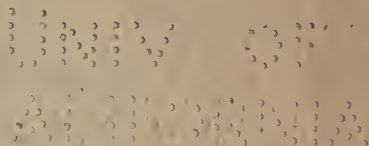
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BROKE OF COVENDEN

BROKE OF COVENDEN

BY

J. C. SNAITH



“When Adam delved and Eve span
Who was then the Gentleman?”

LONDON
CONSTABLE AND COMPANY
LIMITED

replace
253 394

First published June, 1904

Reprinted September, 1904; June, 1905

Revised Edition published April, 1914

Reissued in Constable's Westminster Library of Fiction
May, 1916

Reprinted April, 1919

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PREFACE

*W*ALKING in Piccadilly yesterday morning I met the Complete Englishman. He was a miracle of gloss and gravity. Civilization shone about him like an aureole; the University of Oxford oozed from every pore. The set of his coat, the hang of his trousers, his boots, his tie, his gloves, his umbrella, all had the aplomb which means at least three generations of high feeding. Suddenly, who came ruffling it round the corner of Bond Street but rude Boreas, saluted this paladin with a freedom that ill became a gentleman, knocked off the hat that Mr. Lock had ironed not a quarter of an hour before, cast a speck of mud on the faultless spats, while in the agitation of the moment the glass hopped from the well-trained eye and was shivered into little bits upon the pavement.

Now, was not that a piece of poor behaviour? The bystanders were agreed that Arrius himself could not have been so guilty. And while a district messenger retrieved the hat from the threshold of the Burlington Arcade, whither it had been carried by the gale, while a knight of the vestry swept the glass into the gutter, and a policeman called a hansom, I was moved to reflect upon the melancholy affair. Newton had his mind directed to the law of gravity by the fall of an apple; the fall of my countryman's hat directed my own to one hardly less momentous.

That the gods must have their jest was an old saying in the time of Plato. All down the page of history, in point of fact, it has been the lament of refined and educated minds. The Olympian sense of humour is very positive, if not always academic. That is our complaint.

The laughter of the gods is immemorial, but unfortunately the mode of its indulgence seems open to objection. Laughter itself in worthy hands can be a salutary thing; the pity is that it may too readily become the agent of those who bring it low. Without a spice of this saving quality nothing is worth while. There is no game to be played. But why, we ask, should the Immortal Gods preoccupy themselves with their child's tricks to raise a laugh in Heaven, when we, their victims, can only stand aghast? The sight of a clown thracking a donkey in a booth is surely too primitive at this time of day. Let us frankly admit that the "nostalgie de la vie," that strange unrest and weariness of life, is quite as likely to come upon the Immortals as upon those whose mortality is bounded by a term of days. But we would put it to them: Can they really suppose they are relieving this intolerable pressure upon their own nervous systems when they place humiliations upon ours?

To be perfectly frank, the laughter of the gods is not so agreeable as it might be. Civilization has moved on so much of late as to make it clear that their kind of mirth is out of touch with our immense refinement. To use rightly this rare and precious gift there should be an absence of guile, above all, an absence of intention. Let it be nectar for babes and the gentle-hearted. Alas! the laughter of the gods is much too grim.

They can have no idea how it appals us to find ourselves the victims of an inveterate witlicism. They may feed their gaiety by thrusting a stake through our immaculate waistcoats to observe whether it makes us turn up the whites of our eyes; by wrenching a limb off our bodies to see if we can stand as well on one leg as on two; by stripping off the clothes of our Civilization to see how we can bear a gross return to Nature; by gouging out our eyes to see if darkness will induce in us a drunken stagger; by tampering with our destiny in a thousand ways to provide the entertainment of an afternoon; but really we take no greater pleasure from this form of joy than does a

fly when a wanton boy plucks out its wings. Audiences on High may roar at our antics, but somehow we decline to be amused.

At one time, I am ashamed to say, their invention was even more primitive than it is now. It was like that of a boy who ties a cracker to the tail of a cat, or turns himself into a bear for the purpose of frightening his small sister. Before Genius rose to teach them better, they amused themselves by divorcing character from form and species from environment. The ignoble was beautiful of mansion. An unclean spirit inhabited a virgin shape; while an immortal soul in mortal clay was the consummation of their skill. Beauty mated to the Beast was a fable with a localized significance. There was the case of Pan, himself a god, in the body of a goat. When Æneas descended to the realms of Dis he met a harpy with the face of a woman and the talons of a vulture. He saw a terrible female whose head was quick with serpents. Satyrs and half-men-horses were a common sight. Minerva sprang from the forehead of Jupiter in a suit of mail. There was no end to their legerdemain. The tricks they put upon one another surprised even themselves. But it was very inconvenient when they took to surprising us.

First, they bestowed on Man the gift of Reason, in order that they might be diverted by the uses to which he puts it. That, however, was the device of One to whom I must return later. But the struggle of Man with his Grecian gift has done much for the Immortal gaiety. Nothing has charmed it more than the sight of the poor fellow with his rushlight, his farthing candle, peering into the phenomena of time and space. Yes, my Masters, that was an inspiration, a master-stroke of wit!

When our poor father Adam, the first animal the Gods endowed with Reason, looked up above his garden to scan the blue, what a twitter of delight there was on High Olympus! How they doted on the perplexity of the poor bewildered rogue! How they fêted the unique Talent that had prepared the glad surprise! And the spectacle of the heir of all the ages groping in darkness

with his dip of tallow increases year by year its power upon them. It is this miserable Jack o' Lanthorn which gives us such an opinion of ourselves. We are full of pity for all who are without it; and yet this absurd genie that a whimsical Artist-God bestowed on us in a moment of inspiration when his talent was running free, of which we make no better use than the naked savage who ties a pair of trousers round his neck instead of round his loins, simply leads us on to madness. A footman in livery, or a king in a uniform, looks no more ridiculous than we hapless humans strutting about with our Gift. The Immortals are enchanted with us poor Monsieur Jourdain who use our swords to eat our cheese. The gift of Reason has made us one of the pillars of their Theatre.

Since Man learned to think for himself there has not been a dull moment in Heaven. "Civilization" has played to crowded houses every night. It is the keystone of the Olympian Drama. And the August Talent that made it possible, the great protagonist of their delight, has done more for the entertainment of his fellows than all the poets known to man. His place in the Olympian Theatre is one that Aristophanes and Molière might envy; indeed, without him there had been no Olympian Theatre at all. But I must tell you who he is.

One day, in an unhappy moment for the world, a genius like our Shakespeare rose on High. His talents were an evidence of his obscure origin, but his parts were so brilliant and ingenious that almost at once he was made a god of the first class, just as Swift was made a dean. It seemed wise to propitiate him lest on a day he should turn his surprising talents against his peers and hold them up to ridicule. This Immortal, like our own Swan of Avon, has never been approached in his own particular sphere. He is unique. He is the only one among them who has an invention at once constructive and consecutive; he is the only one among them endowed with Cosmic Imagination. He is an artist, a poet, a philosopher, and a

dramatist. He is of a sovereign intelligence all compact in a milieu that has had no Beginning and is therefore unlikely to have an End.

His first act was to build a theatre in the clouds, and for many years now he has ravished all sorts and conditions of Immortals by performing little things of his own with a company picked from every corner of the world below. It was an unhappy day, indeed, when he turned his attention to mankind. Hitherto the Immortals had always enacted their own farces. They were so primitive that they did not call for specialization. Before the rise of this audacious talent their idea of a humorous piece of mummery was confined to Vulcan's limp when he handed round ambrosia. The gifted amateur was quite equal to parts so elementary. But this Dramatist soon changed all that. His art was so various, so intricate, that, like Molière, he procured a trained company of comedians to interpret it.

As his own fellow gods and goddesses had not enough capacity to embody his ideas, and were in any case debarred by their social position from becoming professional mimes, this Dramatist ransacked every hole and corner of the Universe to look for players. He always said the English made the best comedians. They would face the most exacting situations with an imperturbable phlegm. Their air of high seriousness was simply invaluable whenever it was necessary to impress conviction on the audience. Their solemnity was so fine that they could impart verisimilitude to his most wildly improbable things. Besides, such a demeanour was very piquant. A Frenchman might stand on his head with more grace, more as it were to the manner born, but an Englishman would turn up his heels as though he were sitting in church, and contrive to look "very good form" even with his trousers uppermost. Small wonder that the God would always have these born comedians when he could get them! It is recorded in his journal intime that "whenever he saw an Englishman he could hardly keep his fingers off him."

Consummate in his art, he merits the high-sounding titles his admirers bestowed upon him. For he comprises and excels Aristophanes and Molière, Shakespeare and Sophocles. I can hope to give you no adequate idea of the depth and range of his method. Human life is but a phase of it. The stars in their courses are but another. The source of energy, the mystery of matter, is only a third. He can employ the winds of heaven for a chorus and its lightnings for stage fire. Its thunders may be "a noise heard off L." But with all these resources at his command, with a "universality" more literal than that of our own Swan of Avon, he is ever, in the midst of these egregious epics and fantasies that may be said to cleave space at every point, preoccupying himself with the comic-irony of the Part in its relation to the Whole, the strange and pitiful spectacle of the turbulent spirit of Man submitting to the dictates of Natural Law. Upon that one slight theme alone he has founded a literature.

I cannot tell you what a hero he has become on High. His excursions into drama are the delight of all. The more cynical and arch the combination, the more fresh and unexpected the effects, the franker the joy of that august audience in his ingenuity. Like a French playwright, he has the gift of doing inimitably roguish things with the commonplace. He will espy a Monsieur Jourdain where the untutored eye will see nothing but the most austere and serious propriety. One of his earliest successes was the masque of the British Matron. It was not at all an ambitious effort. It was in his "early manner"; it was as trite as Marivaux, but the wonderful fecundity he showed in the treatment of a subject with which his friends the Critics assured him nothing could be done to add to the Immortal gaiety has made it classical as a Curtain-Raiser.

You have seen a British matron with her brood about her, impregnability in every feather, a sight very poetic and pastoral, an emblem of the barndoor with an immemorial cluck upon her

countenance. Well, he took this virtuous fowl and threw her into all manner of compromising and undignified predicaments. He stripped the feathers off her and laid her bare. He gave such an incorrigibly witty twist to her struttings and prancings about the farmyard that every time she cackled the audience roared and expected her to lay an egg. At every feather he pulled off her decorous form the tears ran down their faces. It was all so perfectly simple but so audacious. Mrs. Grundy Toute Nue while as innocent as Paul et Virginie became as famous for daring as a Restoration Comedy.

Like a radiant imagination playing about the realms of faëry that ruthless fancy lights the primitive theme. It sets such wings upon her chicks that they take a flight into the empyrean and never return to the humble straw of the bereaved parent bird. And when the decently clothed British Barndoor Hen deliberately plucks out her own feathers in her despair, judges of the Olympian Comic Drama will tell you that it is as much a master-stroke of art as anything in Sophocles, and have compared it to poor King *Œdipus* plucking out his eyes.

At psychological moments in the little piece this atrocious Wit proceeds to harass the watchful female parent with Outsiders, who will intrude after the horrid fashion of their kind. A fox is seen to stalk across the yard in the middle of the night with his brush outstretched and his nose upon the ground inquiring for poultry. Again, he allows a gay Lothario in the guise of a cock pheasant to obtrude a flaunting presence among a susceptible brood. And you cannot resist the impudent suggestion that the sorcery of his many plumes and long tail feathers may cause one of these fine mornings as much consternation in that well-regulated household as the apparition of a black baby in a Christian family. A Cochin China with a burnished breast and a tail so long that the farmyard stands aghast may be a happy stroke after the God's own heart, but conceive the feelings of the Cochin China's "people"!

That is the only moral of the simple little play. How many hundreds of times an Olympian audience has roared at it I cannot tell you, any more than I can tell you how many thousands of persons have wept over Manon Lescaut, or laughed at The Vicar of Wakefield. But this little thing is only one among a million of his extravagantly droll but at the same time adorably human fantasies. The cry among us now is all for "realism" in art, as you know. We must have the uncompromising facts of life. In this grim artist you get them; that is why I venture to think you will appreciate any unconsidered trifle of his that is set before you.

It is hard to know what to select from such a mass of achievement, for this Dramatist was even more prolific than M. Dumas the elder. His pieces are all equally characteristic in their boldness of touch, but some are a little more finished than others, which is inevitable when we consider that they are knocked off with the careless insolence of power, while so confident is he in his skill that he scorns to blot a line. And some of his pieces, of course, are very ambitious; and disciples educated to his highest will assure you they are quite his finest things. But as it may call for an æon to represent them and an era of ten thousand years or so to perform the first act, I am afraid that as far as we are concerned they must remain caviare to the general. The diligence of a hundred Gibbons would hardly be able to outline a conception of that kind in English prose. The encyclopædic industry of the author of the Comedie Humaine and the integrity of the author of the "Rougon-Macquart Series," that unrelenting blue-book, would not even suffice to draw up a list of the dramatis personæ to put on the programme.

Any little thing of this Author's of which in my feeble way I may have the presumption to try to give you an idea must, by the nature of the case, be no more than a fugitive piece in its relation to his genius. It must be chosen from the "Civilization Series," a collection of the veriest trifles tossed off in an idle

hour. This Series may be likened, if a comparison will help you, to the "Snob Papers" that the late Mr. Thackeray contributed to Punch. The Author has been known to repudiate them with a laugh if any one had the temerity to mention them in his presence, but they have brought him much kudos in the past, and whenever they are performed, continue to do so at the present day. For there are those among his friends who never tire of putting forward the opinion that these trifles, light and foolish as they are, contain many of his wittiest and happiest and most diverting touches. They have no significance at all the whole series is intended to be played by human souls simply that they may exhibit their limitations before the Gods at first hand; but certain old-fashioned critics on High, with the courage of their convictions, like our Mr. Blank, say that the more high-flown comedies of this Dramatist, such as *The Solar System*, *Reincarnation*, *The Darwinian Theory*, *Evolution*, *The Fourth Dimension*, and all such elaborate art as that, which smells of the lamp and is designed to show his virtuosity, can go to Hades so long as they are allowed to occupy their favourite fauteuils in the Olympian Theatre, and witness a delectable farce, out of the belittled "Civilization Series," played without a smile by adorable Englishmen and adorable Englishwomen. What, ask these stout fellows, can be more exquisitely inane than *Broke of Covenden*, a lever de rideau performed for the first time on the occasion of the six hundred and eighty-fifth anniversary of the signing of Magna Charta in England? The Author felt bound to acknowledge the wild cheers that greeted him at the end of the performance, for which at the time he seemed not ungrateful, yet when two of his friends met him in the street the next day, he said that to be applauded for such a trifle was the most humiliating experience of his life.

The night before, however, there was no mistaking the roars that greeted it in the theatre. Many ardent first-nighters awoke with aching ribs the next morning. And well they might, for

the mirth of these inveterate feasters upon laughter may be heard to echo on such occasions in the uttermost places of the earth. In every nook and cranny of our system can we hear it if we choose. And hearing it we ought to tremble. But we seldom do. For even if we hear it we are apt to think they laugh at others rather than ourselves. There is really no reason why they should laugh at us.

I think, perhaps, I ought to tell you now the name of this great Author, but already you may have guessed it for yourselves. He is called the God of Irony. He is not very popular upon High. He is the essence of politeness to his fellow-immortals, but he really cannot help smiling at them now and then. On their part they pay great deference to this solitary, inaccessible, brooding spirit dwelling in their midst, yet they can never quite forget that in the sight of Heaven he ranks before them all. Even in the midst of many strange and conflicting elements he has become a figure of importance, and in the sight of Man he has emerged as the God of Love.

Wherever there is the breath of life you may discern his handiwork. There is not an insect or a reptile so mean in itself that it simulates the colour of the ground for its own protection, in which you cannot find a trace. Even a fragile plant, that adopts all manner of devices to get its head towards the sun, exhibits it. The Irony of the Creation is hardly less than the Irony of Circumstance. And our poor human life is full of it. This ruthless artist takes human emotion and grinds it into paint more luridly to illuminate the pageant of our mortal life. He takes human endeavour and grinds that into powder too, that it may intermix and make his colours permanent. By his artifice we are at once the means and the subject-matter. The theme is our comic destiny; in order to portray it he dips his brush into a pigment compounded of our flesh and blood. He is the master of that rather weird revel we call existence. He is the stage manager of our feeble little struts, our sorry little

antics. He is the deviser of this pitiful little masque of ours. He is the author of that farrago of inconsequence through which we ruffle it for one crowded hour before the gods on our way to seek oblivion. He has a place to himself in the Olympian Theatre, and is generally alone save when Clio, the Muse of History, trips in upon him with the text of the play or a synopsis of the scenery.

The God of Irony broods and sits apart. He may be compared to an old eagle seated on a great height above the clouds ; an old eagle with a curved beak and talons, whose bloody, mocking, and humorous eyes watch below in the abyss the Soul of Man tossing in the Purgatory of Human Life. He regards the antic writhings of its larvæ with the same impartial zest, the same hearty awe, whether they are real souls quick and nervous, or cunning simulacra whose hearts are made of straw, puppets modelled in wax, draped perfectly, regardless of expense, and painted to look exactly like the genuine article. They are all alike to that amused spectator so long as they show signs of Life. A speck of dust on the shoes may be for one the instrument, whereas another may require a mortal pass ; but what's the odds if only they produce vibration ? He sits watching their unwilling and undignified performances, watching them fret their little hour, with the spectre of a laugh staring out of his old and awful face, except when now and then some naïf performer, a little stiffer in the joints, a little more tardy than the rest, wriggles through its pantomime and seeks to hide its torments with a kind of swagger. If once he can detect that air of bravado, however pitiful it may be, it acts upon him like a cup of wine, and he has been known to vent his feelings in a sudden roar that fairly rocks his ribs, a very Aristophanic bellow.

Indeed, one of his most penetrating critics has said of him that wherever the Inordinate raises its head, whether in a nation or an individual, those bloody and humorous eyes may be seen to hover. And sometimes, in his own inimitable way, he is

tempted to turn it to the uses of his Art, and the result is an odd sort of fantasy or a quaint kind of farce, whereby many beautifully upholstered ladies and gentlemen are able to become a show before the gods.

It is one of these you are bidden to attend. This unconsidered trifle has been chosen with care from the work of this Immortal Farceur. There is not a line in it that can offend, except a little unconventionality here and there, which is, of course, to be expected. But please do not be alarmed. Not once does it go beyond the limits prescribed by the prettily domestic. Mrs. Juno, Masters Castor and Pollux, and Miss Minerva the governess, too, attended a matinée performance and sat in the dress circle, and very pleased they were when they left the theatre. The little thing is so chaste that it can hardly bring the blush of shame to the cheek of even a circulating librarian.

The subject chosen by the Author in this characteristic little fragment is an Englishman of the present time. Why he chose him from among so many of our countrymen were hard to say. What crisp quality first recommended him to his dramatic instinct? Why should his calm-blooded person be seen to contain the theme of one of his most approved and uproarious farces? There is not a line of his exterior to suggest that destiny. You would have thought such an upstanding pillar of our English perfection would have defied even the all-seeing, all-appropriating eye of an Ironist among the gods. There is not a trace of levity in his outward demeanour or his daily life. Summer and winter he rises at the hour of 6,30, takes his cold bath, and shaves his beard. He is precise of habit and reserved of manner. His sluggishness of temper is the envy of all who know him. You may look in vain for a light of the comic in him. If he is laughable, so it would almost seem is gravity itself.

What, then, is the secret of his selection? How was his surprising merit as a natural comedian first made clear? It argues a very profound mind to have traced an affinity to the

House of Molière in an exterior so slab, so heavy-footed, so four-square. Indeed, our ignorance is such that we beg to advance a theory, in order to account for the God of Irony's whimsical choice. It is known that Debrett is his favourite work of English fiction. And among the well-informed it is freely said that the editors of this kind of publication are in the subsidy of the God of Irony to collect, label, and classify likely material for his use.

To be a little more explicit. Our country has lately dedicated a whole literature to the service of that grave body of persons who in divers and unexpected ways have contrived to force their entities upon the public. It is a considerable body, for the Press is very tender-hearted nowadays, so that he who yearns for notoriety does not yearn in vain. It is a catholic body, for mediocrity of every branch, shade and practice, in all the ramifications of its angelic self-sufficiency, has its little garden there. The really great, as all the world knows, have never been scarcer than they are to-day; but in this Valhalla the number of the pseudo, the demi, or half-great is amazing. Perhaps it is one of the penalties of our progress.

It would seem that there is one qualification for admittance into this holy of holies. At the same time it would appear to be as essential as a feat of arms for the emblazonment of a device upon the shield of a knight of old. It is necessary to write a book. The kind of book does not matter very much. It may be on any subject, written in any style; or better, on no subject known to man, written in no style comprehended by him. It may be a sermon, a pamphlet, a treatise, a play, a novel, a book of verses. But provided it is printed and bound, advertised in the Press, praised by the ripe scholar and damned by the irresponsible journalist, the writer, whatever the age or the sex, is free of this shining company. The magic page on which his name is inscribed and that of his parents, the schools and universities that count him an alumnus, his clubs, his pursuits,

his political and religious opinions, his landed estate, his heir-apparent, and the number of horses he has in training, is his peculiar property. His name is allotted the niche dedicated to his great distinction, and he awakes to find himself a "Person of the Period." And there is reason to believe it was while the God of Irony was seeking a moment's relaxation from a more important task that he turned to the source where he was most likely to find it. In other words, he picked up the current issue of this wonderful manual, wetted his observant thumb, and chanced upon what follows :—

Broke, Edmund William Aubrey Carysfort Baigent, J.P., D.L., e.s. of Edmund John Baigent Broke and Lady Caroline, d. of 9th Earl Oxter. b. 1840. m. Jane Sophia, 2nd d. of 12th Baron Bosket of Hipsley. Educ. Eton; Christ Church, Oxford. M.P. unopposed and continuously for South-East Cuttisham and Hundred of Ouvery from 1876 to 1895. Hon. Col. South Parkshire Hussars. Master of Foxhounds (Parkshire) 1879–1881. Conservative in politics. Publication: An Inquiry into the Agricultural Significance of the Preparation and Application of Chemical Manure for the Production of Mangold Wurzel. Owns about 8000 acres. Heir, s. William, b. 1875 (Royal Horse Guards). Recreations, farming, shooting, hunting. Address, 3 Broke Street, St. James's, S.W.; Covenden, Cuttisham, Parkshire; Club, Carlton.

Now, what there was in that inventory to provoke the God I cannot tell. For does it not present the outline of the Immaculate? Is it not the consummation towards which every possessor of five thousand pounds per annum turns his eyes? It is the mirror not of one but of a class. It is Perfection visualized and in the flesh: actual, quick, articulate: spotless linen, matchless puppy-walking, distinguished conduct of the letter H. Perfection laying down its pheasants, preserving its foxes, subsidizing the local hunt with its last guinea; Perfection hurling the thunders of Jove from the county bench four times a year. What can you ask more? It is the best of all that is possible among the best of all possible men.

There does not appear to be a flaw. The fabric of this ideal character is as chaste as the Monarchical System, Government by Party, Trial by Jury, and The Times Newspaper. It is the consecration of the national endeavour. You would have thought it would have given pause even to that Olympian. He could never have seen it admonish a farm labourer for kicking his wife, or send him to penal servitude for snaring a rabbit. This ideal character is so many-sided yet so complete. It is honeycombed with virtue, interwoven, overlapped. There is nothing superficial or skin-deep. The more you delve below the surface the more impressed you will become.

Is it not the picture of a pastoral simpleness? One would have thought that such dignity alone would have kept it sacred. There is not a stroke that could embellish it. Dignity hand in hand with reticence; a well-bred measure of accomplishment and an equally well-bred absence of it. You do not look for genius in the Complete Englishman. That would be sheer folly. Nor do you look for ideas. It would hardly be "cricket" for such a grand exemplar of "good form" to take an unfair advantage of his neighbours. Besides, he would forfeit a few feathers of his caste in his divergence from type. What are conventions for? A vegetable is quite respectable. A cabbage is perhaps the most decent thing in nature.

Let us, then, rejoice that our paladin is armed so fully. There is not a touch wanting to vindicate his passion for the right and proper. He has paid his court to war and letters. He has served his country in the senate, but is prepared to serve her in the field. He has written his monograph, but is also the patron of manly exercises. He has made the laws of the people, and now sees that they get them. He has his solid stake in the country and done his duty by the population. He is faithful to the fine national religion that you can never have too much of the best. A cabbage-patch with an Englishman standing on it is better than all the sciences, all the philosophies. Indeed, to insist on

his merit would be a work of supererogation were we not Englishmen all, and akin to him therefore in our unwillingness to treat it as a mere matter of course. You see where he has been educated. Yet he has escaped the peerage at present by a concatenation of circumstances it will be our duty to investigate. It is almost incredible that such an example of concrete virtue has received no sanction from the state. Are we relapsing upon Barbarism, do you think? Surely all roads in our Civilization lead to the Mecca of an Embodied Excellence, otherwise we should have continued to walk naked and eat our wives' relations.

We can never tire of protesting that the God of Irony might have had more reverence for our feelings as a nation and a great one, than to have selected this fair, this radiant, image of all we hold to be worthy, for the diversion of himself and his peers. Far rather we had yielded to him Paradise Lost and the tragedy of Hamlet. He should have had our best, our all in art and literature if only he had spared this incomparable thing.

It may be gathered from internal evidence that the ruthless Hunter, having once started the quarry, never left his line. There is reason to believe he did not fail to observe the asterisks that were dotted against divers names on that fatal page of the manual. In elucidation of them the following note was printed at the bottom:—

“For correct pronunciation refer to page 15, 413.”

Upon turning to the page in question he was, in common with a more reverent-minded English middle class, entreated to spell them Marjoribanks and to pronounce them Cholmondeley.

Thus:—

Broke	becomes	Brook.
Covenden	„	Cuvvin'den.
Baigent	„	Bay'gent (“g” as in “gentleman”).

It is stated on high authority that when the God of Irony received this information he slapped his hand on his bleak thigh-bone and uttered his historical saying, “Ha, these English!”

On looking in other directions he obtained more light on, and additional lustres for, the name in question. It is thought that after first sighting his quarry in Persons of the Period, he followed him through the more elaborate tome, which we understand contains much of his favourite reading: Sir Horatio Hare's Peerage, Baronetage, Knightage, and Landed Gentry. It may interest the curious to learn—and in such matters who is not curious?—that Sir Horatio wrote this monumental work entirely out of his own head. That he was able to accomplish a feat of this magnitude was due to his extensive family connections.

There is also a companion work, Sir Horatio Hare's Stately Homes of England, with plates. This too is extempore, and even the plates are the work of the same gifted hand. There is not a great house in the three kingdoms; provided it has a deer park around it, or a mortgage upon it, in which Sir Horatio has not stayed so long as it suited his convenience. There is a description of Covenden Hall, Volume 106, pages 322–323. It is very brief, however, as Sir Horatio only broke his journey there one night on his way to Hipsley. Unfortunately there is no illustration of it to accompany the text, because as the accomplished author only stayed for bed and breakfast he had not even time to sketch the façade. The house is a comfortable red-brick of the time of Charles I. It stands on a slight eminence at the eastern extremity of the Folden Hills. High Cliff is visible on a clear day. There is a mounting-block beside the front door, which is an excellent specimen of Early English; and the same applies to several querns on the terraces. The carving over the porch is slightly defaced, but is undoubtedly a fine example of Late Jacobean. Sir Horatio takes occasion to correct the popular fallacy that the present manor-house stands on the site of a former one, dating from the Conquest. The old one is half a mile away in the corner of the park, and the hunting-tower and a fragment of a wall still remain.

The present writer has no authority to divulge the means by which several fragments of the work of this very remarkable Author have come into his hands. But he has long felt that the work of this Author is very imperfectly known, and where known very inadequately appreciated in England. Therefore, in venturing to present this slight fragment in a shape that makes it accessible to all, it has been his aim to adapt it as far as possible to the needs of a wide public.

In throwing it somewhat arbitrarily into the form of a novel we defer to the prejudice of the age; and by investing it with all the dulness at our command believe we are dissociating ourselves as far as possible from the design of the original Author, who intended entertainment only, and that in our humble way we are doing something to reinstate this heroic figure in something of a former self-complacency which has long been the admiration of himself and all who know him. Even at the risk of becoming dramatized ourselves by the illustrious Author we feel we cannot too strongly repudiate the attitude he has allowed himself to adopt, or too keenly resent the audacity of his conception. By an invincible prolixity, however, of which the novel has long been the chosen vehicle, we shall endeavour to soften these affronts, surrender to the heroic subject a little of the dignity of his former condition, and replace him, as it were, in the centre of his gravity. We at least cannot find it in our heart to treat of him in a spirit of persiflage. The Author himself may have no reverence for the best our country has to offer, but let not us forget our birthright. Our subject is English of the English; let us yield to him therefore every morsel of the solemnity which is his due. Surely it would be highly improper for a county magnate to be wafted to the local cattle show upon Arcadian airs!

Let an incomparable tedium avenge the violation of a sacred memory. Still, dulness is not always so easy as it looks. We have yet to gauge the measure of our subject's susceptibility. A

thistle blowing among his turnips may lead him down a bypath to the virgin meadows of romance, or he may stray at eve into a haunted brake. Gentlemen as austere as he have found themselves ere now enmeshed in little copses wild and overblown with poetry, that demoralizing weed. These things are hardly likely, but he who touches upon chivalry is hardly wise to ignore the romantic possibilities in a latter-day Don Quixote. The reader also may be highly strung. In that case our vigilance must be redoubled, for a word may become a thing of interest; a note of exclamation may arrest; in some harmless phrase may lurk strange glamour; a name may captivate the ear; the mention of a woman may be as thrilling as Friday's footprint on the sand.

For the rest this picture of a latter-day Don Quixote has all the pathos of the commonplace. The edifying thing upon whose comic tribulations we have ventured to base our story is no hermaphrodite, no freak of nature, no monstrosity in flesh. Our hero is physically perfect with two hands and ten toes, ruddy of visage, a sound sleeper, and without any trace of a valetudinarian habit, if we except a slight tendency to deafness in his left ear, the result of an attack of scarlatina which visited him at his private school as a very small boy indeed. A poor enough figure for the hero of a novel certainly, particularly as we have to confess that, in addition to his rude and unromantic health, he is no longer in the flush of youth. In fact, he is the staidest man who ever attended a parish council, and was first nominated as "Vicar's Warden" in 1863. He is a man with a grown-up family, and the only illusions that are left to him are not of the stuff that dreams are made. But he owes his appearance in our pages to the fact that he is a man belonging by right of birth to the Twelfth Century after Christ, projected without rhyme or reason into our enlightened Twentieth. He is a survival of the Medieval, the golden age of knighthood, when it was not improper for your urban burghess to strap a dagger to his

stomach, and paterfamilias stalked to church in chain-mail armour. He is handed down to us from eight hundred years ago in all his authenticity. He has been preserved miraculously like a saurian embedded in a rock. Nothing is changed in him but the time of day, his hatter and his tailor. He no longer wears the bassinet as when he rode to Runnymede to put his mark to Magna Charta. In our Utopia he sits in Parliament in a black silk hat. But scratch him, and you find the feudal baron. An inch below Poole and Lock lurks the Inordinate. Touch that—nay, only so much as gaze upon it—and he is prepared to break your costard or to cleave you to the chine, although Progress has bereft him of any nicer weapon at this hour than the ferrule of his umbrella or the point of his shooting-seat, both of which were made in Birmingham, the sacred fount whence our culture flows. Does it not seem a pity, now that King Romance is born again, and the gentle publisher waxes upon Wardour Street and grows fat with incredible editions, that our hero, equipped with the skin and bone of an imperious popularity, did not learn of his pastors and his masters “By my halidom!” instead of “Don’t you know?”

BROKE OF COVENDEN

CHAPTER I

AN ENGLISH GENTLEMAN IN THE BOSOM OF HIS FAMILY

BROKE OF COVENDEN had for the enlightenment of his middle life one son and six daughters. The son had learned already to live beyond his income like a gentleman: he had been in the Blues nearly a year. His tailor was the most expensive in London; his clubs the most exclusive; his friends the most numerous; and although he was far too patrician to pay his bills, all the world deemed it an honour to serve him. Nature had deemed it an honour as well. She had formed his person, polished his skin, and turned his features with such fastidious care that had Reason held her court in these external parts he would have been worthy of his pedestal in any of her galleries. Connoisseurs were agreed, however, and among them you might count his mother, that the upper storey had been modelled somewhat primitively for the work to be a masterpiece.

The daughters had been educated in a Spartan manner. In the technical metaphor of their Uncle Charles, "The little fillies had been broken before they had their teeth." This was one of many privileges they owed to the foresight of their mother, that austere lady who held the opinion that girls without money could not afford to keep minds of their own—until they were married, that was. A glance at their noses, those famous and unfortunate emblems of their race, at their clear and candid eyes; at the honest blood in their

cheeks, and you would have seen at once that here was a team to respond to the hand's lightest pressure.

Their father was their friend and slave. In all that pertained to his name his pride was invincible. And these lusty creatures, wearing the stamp of Broke without embellishment, were as priceless in his eyes as the acres that had bred them, and the pedigree that had evoked their being. They were inalienable bloodstock; their names were in the book. But their mother, who had to represent their qualities to the world, had sadly to confess that they had not a penny apiece to their *dot*; that their looks had all forgathered in their preposterous noses; that their minds were centred wholly upon horseflesh—of great service to man no doubt, but hardly his vade-mecum. How she was to find husbands for them she did not know, seeing that their horoscopes had been cast in an age of competition, when every girl was equipped with beauty, charm, a nasal accent, or a million sterling. And there were phenomena, as the newspapers were never tired of telling her, who had all these gifts in one.

Their father would hear no complaints of them, however. With his great guffaw would he vow—and if there was a suspicion of vainglory in it, do not forget he was a signal member of his nation—that he would not have them otherwise by so much as a hair. They were Brokes, every clean inch of them, outside and inside, top to toe; he would ask what *they* wanted with good looks and accomplishments and the fal-lals of the middle classes?

At eight o'clock on the morning of the seventeenth anniversary of the birth of his youngest daughter, under whose inauspicious star we begin our story, Broke having fortified his household with prayer, in order to prosper the souls of the servants, sat down to breakfast with his wife. They were alone. A slight excess of amenity on the part of Mrs. Broke told the ministers in attendance that the world this morning was awry.

The redoubtable six daughters of the house had not only missed prayers altogether, but were actually late for breakfast. An account would have to be rendered.

Antiquity could hardly furnish a parallel. The laws of the Medes and Persians might change; the Greek Kalends might arrive; the earth might be struck by a comet, but eight o'clock was the hour at which they sounded the gong at Covenden Hall.

Mrs. Broke was a superb disciplinarian, and born to organize. She ordered her household like a camp, and recommended herself to Providence by a really wonderful vigilance. Waste in that house there was not; no detail was too trivial for her personal attention. In the course of a year she reclaimed the pittance of a younger son by force of management. Indeed, if Broke had not rejoiced in the possession of one of this salutary spirit to trim his affairs, foreign and domestic, the ever-impending crash must have fallen on his ears long before the period at which we find him.

She was a notable person, even in the day of the emancipation of her sex, a fine example of "the wholesome mind in the wholesome body"; the *beau idéal* of British motherhood among a people so divinely practical. But she was even more. Wherever we find a furtive laughter at the world let us seek for disillusion. Her mellow note was evidence that she knew how to look at life. She had achieved, for her sex, the somewhat gross feat of viewing it with the naked eye, yet had hardly surrendered a feather of her femininity in a behaviour so unladylike. That her fibres had coarsened a little she would have been the first to confess, but was not that the penalty for looking at the ugly thing? The gazers on the Gorgon did not get off so easily.

It was pleasant to see her in her plain morning dress. Capability was stamped on every line of that placid exterior. There was also dignity; those urbane reserves; that charming candour so indispensable to a woman of the world. This animated serenity was always there. It was extended to her family with the same unfailing liberality as to members of the Government and persons accredited to the Court of St. James when they took her in to dinner in town. Secretly her daughters dreaded it. In the simplicity of their childlike hearts they feared it a great deal

more than they need have done. But their instincts had always perceived a gleam of steel beneath the velvet, a gauntlet of iron under the glove. Such a gracious immobility was a curtain, a mask. If only they could have been sure of finding something real behind it, they might have learned to take their courage in their hands and tear it down.

A look of amused indulgence lurked in the corners of Mrs. Broke's mouth as she regarded the vacant places at the table.

"How busy the girls must be this morning! It is so unlike them to forget a meal!"

"They were not dancing last night?" Broke asked.

"Oh, no! They were in bed by ten. I heard their voices on the lawn at six."

"Better keep the bacon and coffee hot, anyhow."

"Pray don't trouble, Porson," said Mrs. Broke, as the butler began to hover about the side table.

Broke was soon entrenched behind his morning paper, while his wife read the more enticing of her letters. The first chanced to be a piece of cardboard in these terms: "The Lady Salmon At Home—Toplands—22nd February. Dancing 9 to 3." On the top was written, "The Honble. Mrs. Broke and party."

With a demure smile the recipient contrived to get this document across the table and past the barrier of the morning's news. Broke lowered his paper for a moment and was seen to read. In the act he might also have been seen to be frowning heavily.

"Impertinence!" he said.

"A little uncompromising, my dear?"

"Not at all. Impertinence!"

A whimsical little sigh escaped Mrs. Broke. It was also fond, like that of a mother who opens the nursery door and has her ears assailed with a tin trumpet blown by a petticoated son and heir who is making a furious circuit of the room with a tin sword, a paper helmet, and a wooden charger.

"You were not going to know those people, I understood."

"One must surrender a little to the spirit of the age, my dear."

"I—ah, don't see what the age has got to do with it. It makes those people no better. It makes 'em worse."

Mrs. Broke pursed her mouth woingly. She was an oppressively plain woman with all the tricks of a professional beauty.

"If this were the age of idealism there might be an objection even to a Jew financier. But there is surely no need at this time of day to shy at the gentle Semite."

"I—ah, deny that things are as bad as you say."

"Then you become Don Quixote at once. Wasn't it the Knight of La Mancha who pursued an impossible ideal long after it was in its grave? And please remember, my dear, that because he ran a-tilt at his time and got only a broken head for his pains, the world still laughs at him."

"Rubbish!"

"A sense of humour, my dear!"

"I have too much, unfortunately. I wonder what those people take us for!"

"It is not so much what they take us for, it is what we are. When we no longer deceive others, oughtn't we to give up trying to deceive ourselves?"

"I—ah, don't quite follow."

"You must come off the high horse, my dear. The interesting animal is a little out of date. Besides, hasn't one rather lost the art of sitting it? People laugh."

"Why, I don't know."

"There are a thousand reasons. Many of them humiliating, rather sordid."

"Money I—ah, suppose."

Broke spoke with the reluctance of intellectual effort.

"You are wise to make that admission."

"I—ah, make no admission. We may be rather hard up, but we have managed to rub along without Tom, Dick, and Harry up till now, and I—ah, don't see why we shouldn't go on."

Mrs. Broke shook her head archly at her lord. There was

a gentle indulgence also. She had a very keen sense of the ridiculous.

Before either side was able to pursue this academic controversy, in which in one form or another they were continually involved, Broke's heavy face lightened to a look of pleasure. Voices sounded across the lawn. Raised in laughter and excitement, they were clear and ringing, of a bell-like timbre, to be heard a long way off. Within a minute the girls streamed in through the French window of the room in which their father and mother sat.

There was a curious uniformity in one and all. Six peas in a pod could not have been more absurdly alike. People had to know them very well indeed to be able to tell one from another. They had an air of being made according to regulation. Every small detail of them seemed wrought after some arbitrary pattern which had the sanction of authority, like service tunics or policemen's boots or helmets. This could not be said to make for beauty, indeed in the world's opinion they were decidedly plain, not to say ugly. Even their friends were apt to indulge in a little humorous shrug when their names were mentioned.

The only compliment you could pay them positively was that they were beautifully clean. Even that was not without its pathos, for is it not a painfully negative compliment to pay to their sex?—and here it was accentuated with a cruel sharpness by their old and rude and shabby and misshapen clothes. Their old straw hats, encircled by weather-stained black ribbons, bore witness to the fact that more than one summer and winter had beaten over them; their boots were thick and clumsy; their short skirts flopped about gaunt ankles. Physically they had nothing to overcome and carry off their clothes which drooped dankly on their lean flanks. Small and thin, with a greyhound's spareness, eloquent of a life in the open, they were much too wiry and fine-drawn for feminine enchantments. "Hard-bitten beggars," their father called them.

In colour they were as the doe, and healthy as the east wind. In their faces was the keen wistfulness of the fox-hound. Their austere features thrown into too sudden

relief by the arch of a perfectly preposterous nose, they were only saved from the grotesque by a miracle. Even as it was, had they been sensitive they would not have to look far to find tragedy.

Still, however, there were those who were not afraid to admire. For if to vivid health be added youth, to which is superadded that saving quality that goes by the name of breeding, the mysterious aroma savouring of nature and the soil, like the bouquet in wine, merit may be evolved even where you look to find it least. Many a half-protesting, half-apologetic portrait was furnished of them by the indulgent people with whom they were brought in contact. They were compared now to clean-run horses, now to Belvoir entry; but as usual their Uncle Charles transcended all in boldness of imagery. His dictum to his sister was: "Those little fillies are like that old bull-bitch of mine—too full o' breed. You'll never marry 'em, Jane, any more than my old bitch will ever take a prize at a show."

As they streamed in through the open window, bearing the February hoar on their shoes and coats and in their hair, they looked six of the wholesomest things that ever exulted in liberty.

They were at a fine pitch of excitement. Adventures rare and strange had befallen them; but as all their tongues were going at once and tuned to an epic fervour befitting their deeds, their father at first was not very much the wiser.

"Yes, yes," he said, "capital story—devilish exciting; but if you've no objection I'd like to know what it is all about. One at a time—if you've no objection. Now then, Joan."

"We've caught a badger, father," said his eldest daughter.

"No, father, we dug it out," sang the other five.

"No, old Joe dug it out," said Joan.

"But we helped him," said Margaret.

"It is a dog badger, father," said Philippa importantly.

"Oh, indeed!"

"It is *e-nor-mous*, father," said Harriet, with round and wide and earnest eyes

"So I understand."

"It is very ugly, father," said Jane.

"And *very* fierce."

"And it *does* look wicked."

"And it is *ever* so shaggy."

"And it has got *such* teeth!" they chimed one after another, each standing upon her prescriptive right to furnish her own description for her sire. It was left for his youngest daughter, however, to illuminate this mass of detail with a touch of realism.

"And, oh, father!" said Delia, "it *can* bite!" With considerable pride she displayed a finger wrapped in a handkerchief, spotted freely with blood.

"Silly little beggar!" Her father took hold of her and looked at the wound. "Silly little fool!" He tapped a cheek that was as ruddy as an apple.

Joe had been brought to show the badger. That wizened retainer stood on the lawn in his moleskin waistcoat, with his captive in a bag. Broke was haled into the winter morning to inspect the creature. Nothing short of his personal sanction could appease the pride of its captors. A word from him was the crown of any high emprise. Mrs. Broke also followed to do it honour. She was uninvited, and was not interested in the least, but it was characteristic of her that she never failed in any little act, however trivial or perfunctory, if there was a superficial grace in the performance of it. She opened more bazaars than any lady in the county. Where another would not have taken the trouble to leave her chair, she sallied out with an alert smile of patronage.

The comments of man and wife on the wild-looking beast were characteristic.

"Ugly devil!" said Broke.

"How *very* quaint and delightful!" said Mrs. Broke. "Oh, you *dear* thing! It is so clever of you girls to have caught it, I'm sure. You must be so pleased. You will keep it for a pet of course. You must ask Joe to build it a hutch. You can take it away now, Joe; and thank you so much."

The badger being thus delicately dismissed, its captors sat down to their belated meal.

"We found it half-way up the hill, father, in the next field to the spinney," Broke was informed. "It was near the old elm where we saw the white owl in the summer."

"If you catch that, there will be a shilling apiece for you."

Under the spell cast by this shining lure they began upon their breakfast. Abundant yet primitive, it was a feast over which youth alone might hope to triumph. It consisted of a huge dish heaped with bacon, long ago cold and frozen in its grease, thick slabs of bread, and large cups of very weak and lukewarm coffee. Their appetites flinched from nothing, however, nor did they pause to discriminate. They made short work of a meal at which a civilized digestion would have shuddered.

"The meet's at half-past eleven—up at the Grove."

"Of course, father."

They nodded sagely across their coffee-cups.

"Whose turn to-day?"

The question provoked a new uproar. Their tongues were again unloosed; for a moment they ran riot in a near approach to strife. Broke cried "Chair! Chair!" and tapped the table sharply. Their sudden obedience was rather ludicrous; the loudest voice was quelled at once. Such a sense of discipline was the fruit of centuries, no doubt; they were descended from generations of warriors accustomed to obey and to be obeyed.

"Now then, Joan, who rides?"

"We don't know, father," said his eldest daughter, with a face of perplexity. "The Doctor put his foot in a rabbit-hole last week and strained his off fore-leg. George says we can't have him out for a fortnight. And Whitenose has got a hot hock, and Robin has been coughing in the night."

"H'm—unfortunate. Still, settle it somehow."

These sportswomen, to have recourse again to the technical language of their Uncle Charles, the master of the pack, "Six-days-a-weekers every one," had to have their privileges regulated on a fixed principle. There was a limit to their stable. In the height of the season, if stress

of weather did not intervene to give their horses a rest, they either had to set days apart for this purpose, or submit to be mounted four at a time, while the two remaining did what they could with their bicycles. The accident to The Doctor, and the precarious condition of Whitenose and Robin, had made it imperative that a third should forego her claims to the appropriate mode. One and all were much too keen, however, to waive them lightly. Jane and Harriet retired by rotation, but none of the more fortunate four was able to see that self-sacrifice coincided with perfect equity. Besides, is it not eminently British to insist on your rights as an individual should you happen to possess any?

Here it was, for the first time in the history of the house, that anarchy, the modern canker, showed a disposition to rear its head in an ancient virgin government.

The voice of Delia was heard in the land.

"Perhaps we might have one of the bays for to-day," said the youngest daughter of the house in a timidly tentative manner.

She blushed to hear her own voice in public. Alone in that august assembly the hardihood seemed too immense. But it is only timidity that is cursed with a particular kind of boldness. The next instant she blushed still more. The entire business of the table was suspended while five amazed faces turned towards her. Five coffee-cups were laid down with an air of resolute wonder.

On three distinct counts Delia's guilt was enormous. In the first place she had no right to hold an opinion on any subject, much less to have the effrontery to utter it before their father. Again, if she had a right, the privilege of giving it publication in that august assembly was wholly precluded by her extreme youth—she was a whole year younger than Harriet, two years younger than Jane and Margaret, four years younger than Philippa, and actually five years younger than Joan! And, most heinous offence of all, she had been guilty of an idea! How such a silly, inoffensive little kid had come by such a dangerous implement they could not guess. And she dared to show it off before her father.

In a painful silence they waited while Joan, the one having authority, and always their natural leader by an inimitable force of character, proceeded to deal with this dangerous heresy.

"It doesn't seem right," said that formidable young woman, in a tone as exquisitely detached as that of her famous aunt Emma, "to ride to hounds on a coach horse. It seems like making a pretence of doing what you can't. If one is not to be with hounds, I think one ought to go on a bicycle. Besides, we have not been used to it."

The others chimed in solemnly to crush their youngest sister with their grave accord. It was a terrible disgrace for her, before their father too, poor child! but your truly Spartan nature does not flinch from the infliction of punishment, even when it is likely to recoil on those who wield the rod. But it was left to their father himself to lay on the severest stroke.

"I think you are right, Joan," he said with a gravity as magisterial as their own. "It is a fine point, but I—ah, endorse your view. Not that it matters, of course, but personally I—ah, think it can be considered. It has not struck me in that light before, but now it is pointed out the spirit is sound. Of course you can go on anything with four legs to it, if you have not anything better, or are not used to—ah, anything better; but I think you are right if you don't. It may be drawing it a bit fine, but personally I—ah, think one cannot be too jealous for the—ah, dignity of covert."

This piece of dialectics, given in the judicial syllables of an admired Chairman of Quarter Sessions, thrilled five excited bosoms of those present in that court. There was a sixth—a sixth who had opened her mischievous blue eyes and was laughing softly, an incendiary for whom happily neither the judge nor the jury, terribly in earnest as they were, could spare a thought.—But the culprit herself was overcome with shame. That she had committed an awful solecism had been made clear to her; all the same she could not tell what it was. There was a subtle twist in her callow mind that forbade it to appreciate the banality of riding a

coach horse to hounds ; and worse, the affront to custom. Others rode any sort of horse, why not they ? Probably it was a new idea to them ; but to others it was not. Delia's face grew such a vivid scarlet that even her father noticed it. The next moment she was trembling under his great guffaw.

"My dear child," he said, "you are not going to be a woman of ideas, are you ? Not going to be a second Aunt Emma, eh, little girl ? Must be careful, must be careful."

Delia nearly wept. That stroke cut very deep. Such a reference had never been made by their father before, although their mother had long known its value. The culprit redoubled her efforts to find in what she had offended. Like a captive bird she beat against the cage of her intelligence, but she could not read the secret of her crime. Yet whatever it might be, she tried to wipe out the stain by an act of public virtue.

"I will bicycle to-day, Joan." Her face was still burning.

"Indeed, no," said Joan. "That would not be fair. We would not ask it of you." There was a snub in the level voice that made Delia too frightened to say another word.

In the end the question of who should ride horses and who should ride bicycles was submitted to him most fitted to decide it. As no method of escaping the *impasse* was vouchsafed to the feminine intelligence it was clearly a case for the higher court. Their faith in their father was most catholic. On the lightest or most abstruse point his word was law. He chose on this occasion, in the fashion of Solomon, to expound his wisdom by a mechanical means.

"Better draw lots. Put your names in a hat."

Chance decreed that Delia must forfeit her claim. Indeed no less was expected of that inexorable Destiny which never forgets to punish, although by no means so conscientious in the matter of rewards. Surely it was just that she who had dared to suggest a coach horse should be condemned to an even cruder means of locomotion. Poor child, on her birthday too ! Still, it was no part of the duties of Destiny to take cognizance of incongruities of that kind.

However, no sooner had all been contrived to their satis-

faction, and they had fallen to discussing the behaviour of the frost and the prospect of its going in time for hounds to do their work, when their mother interposed in that mild and gracious voice they had cause to know so well.

“I was rather hoping, girls, that you would not hunt to-day. Do you think I could persuade you to do two or three hours’ reading with me before luncheon? It might be of service to your minds, and I am sure you will wish to neglect no means of improving them.”

The faces of the six Dianas were a picture of consternation.

“As you were not present this morning at prayers, I feel sure that two or three hours’ solid reading will help you to regain a little of that which you have lost. I am sure we all agree with dear Aunt Emma when she says in her famous book, ‘that a portion of the higher literature, German, Scandinavian, or Chinese for preference, read aloud in the home, morning or evening, or even in the middle of the day, or at any hour when one is not in bed, is to the animal spirit a sedative, and to the understanding as an iron tonic.’”

The stroke was dealt by a mistress in the art. The air of deep maternal solicitude that put them back into the nursery at once, the winning grace, and, above all, the reference to the author of *Poses in the Opaque*, that far-sought collection of essays whose publication marked an epoch in the world of taste, brought such a flush to their cheeks as nothing else could have done.

They had not a word to say in mitigation of the ukase. To be sure they were no longer in the nursery, but their discipline was a wonderful thing. They were physically incapable of questioning authority, even in its most arbitrary exercise. In silence they bowed their proud heads, and re-applied themselves to bacon. If there was a slightly moist softness in the eyes of Delia, let it be remembered that she was a full year the youngest of them all, and precisely by that length of time was less of a Broke than her sisters.

“I think you are a bit hard on them,” said their father. “Anyhow, they shall go to-morrow. But I don’t think they will miss much; we never have much luck at the

Grove, Besides, this frost may not clear off after all ; and even if it does, the going will be pretty bad."

Such consolation, elaborate as it was, did not soften their pangs ; but it was this sort of tenderness for them that made their father the finest comrade in the world. Not only was he a god and a hero, but a personal friend ; a happy combination of qualities that implies a nature of an almost paradoxical scope.

Howbeit, at this painful moment, when there was no more bacon left on the dish and only grains in the coffee-pot, when, therefore, even that natural consolation had begun to fail, a diversion was caused by the opening of the door, and the announcement—

" Lord Bosket."

CHAPTER II

UNCLE CHARLES

AN odd little man waddled in. His legs were so crooked with addiction to the saddle that he looked as painfully out of his element in a pedestrian mode as a mariner on dry land. His face and head were as bald as a toad's—the Sieur de Montaigne's, if the Sieur had not had a little moustache. The colour of his skin, empurpled by the wind and rain, was that of a tomato; not only brave in good living and the open air, but with also a shine of wassail in it, a puffy lustre that enhanced the bloom of his complexion while it blurred the ferret-like sharpness of his face. His somewhat debased features were suffused with melancholy, partly querulous and partly humorous, which lent him the slightly whimsical air of one who has the habit of looking at things with his own peculiar eyes. He was as one who acquiesces in his lot against his judgment, yet shrinks from seeking another lest, so poor is his opinion of himself and the world in general, he should find a worse. In his mouth was a straw; in his hunting-stock an enormous pin cast in the device of a fox; a fur-lined great-coat was thrown back to display his “pink,” and as he waddled in twirling his velvet cap on the end of his whip it was not easy for any save the very expert in the fine shades of gentility to tell where the groom ended and the gentleman began.

“Mornin’,” he said, with a large gesture that embraced one and all in a manner which was a wonderful blend of the affectionate and the casual. “How are my little cockyoly birds this mornin’? Pert as robins, and as sharp as hawks? Peckin’, are they? Noses in the manger? Toppin’ up with

porridge and bacon and a bit o' marmalade? What, no marmalade! Here, my boy, the marmalade *at once*."

While this edible was being procured, Lord Bosket wagged his head and muttered, "Must have marmalade," in various keys. On its appearance he examined it as critically as a bushel of oats for a favourite mare, and set out on a tour of the table, dabbing a large spoonful on the plate of each of his nieces, ending with Delia, upon whom he bestowed "one extry for little Miss Muffett."

"And what's the matter with her finger?"

"A badger has bitten it, Uncle Charles," said Delia, with considerable pride.

"A *badger* has bitten it. Lord-love-a-duck! Dig badgers and ichthyo-what-do-you-call-ems out o' the kitchen garden, I suppose?"

"Out of the spinney, Uncle Charles," they chimed together.

A second account of the great event, as animated and incoherent as the first, was furnished for this indulgent sportsman.

"Marvellous!—but we'll be diggin' out foxes in a brace o' shakes," said he, when at last he could get in a word. "We shall have the sun before you can say 'Knife!' The goin' is on the hard side at present, but wait a bit and it will be all right."

Somehow this announcement fell flat. His nieces failed to beacon in reponse, which they did invariably, no less being demanded of them by him and by that particular topic. A reaction was provoked at once; slight, to be sure, yet sufficient to urge him to fly to the specific for his temperament.

"Porson," he said, glancing about querulously. "Where is the old fool! Why don't you bring that whisky and soda, you stoopid old feller?"

"I beg your lordship's pardon."

Already the butler was toddling towards him with a tray of spirits and mineral waters. The specific had not been ordered; but experience had taught Porson to take time by the forelock.

Measuring out one half-pennyworth of soda water to an

intolerable deal of whisky, my lord dispatched the mixture in a consummate manner with one jerk of the hand. He shut his eyes and then reopened them slowly in an exercise of the critical faculty.

"Good water," he said. "Very good water, but the whisky's poisonous. Funny thing, I never come into this house without having to lodge an objection. It'll have to be brought before the Stewards. Sort of thing that gets a house a bad name. The whisky's raw; get me some turpentine to cool my tongue. Have this in the keg?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Keep it in the wood?"

"Yes, my lord."

"'Straordinary thing! Do you buy it or do they pay you to take it away?"

"I beg your lordship's pardon, but this came from Hipsley with your lordship's compliments as a Christmas gift."

"What—what—what—what—what?"

Querulously Lord Bosket placed his hand behind his ear. The butler's patient repetition of his statement belonged to the region of art.

"You must be wrong, my boy, you must be wrong."

"I have the label, my lord."

"Then send that whisky back and tell Paling you are to have a keg of the 'special' with the green ticket, and mind you look at the bung. Ask Paling what he means by it. God bless my soul, what are things coming to?"

This urgent matter being at last adjusted, Lord Bosket turned an eye of petulant inquiry upon his nieces.

"Which of you little fillies has got a birthday this mornin'?"

Delia shifted shy eyes up to him.

"Oh, it's the young one, is it! May I ask what's *your* fancy, miss?"

"If you please, Uncle Charles, I should like a horse," said Delia, with an air which if very timid was also very full of decision.

"You would like a horse. 'Straordinary how great minds

think alike. It happens, miss, that a horse is just what I've brought you."

"Oh, Uncle Charles!" said Delia, with a quick heightening of colour.

"A pretty little horse for a pretty little lady. And manners—well, I wish your Aunt Emma would take pattern. Pretty bit o' stuff."

"You ought not to do it, Charles," said Broke. "How many more are you going to give them?"

"What do you know about it, my boy? If now and then I can't find a mount for my own fillies it's a pity. They are the only ones I've got, and all with a weakness for good cattle, same as me. Goin' to hunt the fox this mornin'—eh, little gals? We shall have you larking over those fences. Hallo, here comes Mr. Sun! What did I say! Nobody'll know there's been a frost in another hour. Saw Padgett as I came by. He says the varmints are as thick in the spinney as eels in a mill dam."

But for once his nieces failed to respond to his enthusiasm. As a rule eager faces greeted the lightest allusion to the chase, but to-day even their interest seemed perfunctory. He looked at them, and then at their mother with his eye of whimsical inquiry.

"They *are* comin', Jane?"

"Not to-day, Charles," said his sister in her mild voice.

"Wh-a-a-at?"

Lord Bosket removed the straw from his mouth with extraordinary resolution.

"I am sincerely sorry, Charles," said his sister, with a demure mischief in her eyes.

"Sorry be damned. Are they goin' to do five-finger exercises, or what?"

"We hope to read a little German philosophy this mornin'."

My lord returned the straw to his mouth with a resolution even more extraordinary than that with which he had taken it out.

"Well, that's a good 'un. Jane, you've taken the bun. The six cleverest customers in the county readin' German

philosophy ! That's a pretty tale to pitch, upon my Sam ! Why, my good woman, it is the meet o' the year. They are runnin' a special from town."

Lord Bosket appealed to his brother-in-law.

"What do you say, Edmund ?"

"I—ah, think Jane is a bit hard on them," said Broke, with a dignified hesitation.

Uncle Charles was aware, however, that there could be no redress from this quarter.

"Here's the sun in pink," he went on, rising to eloquence, for here was a grievance indeed ; "and the frost gone to ground, and everything as right as rain, and you are goin' to keep the headstall on those little gals, and cram 'em with German. I'm not much of a hand at religion, Jane, but if you've been studyin' how to crab the Almighty, I reckon you have about brought it off this time. If you are not makin' a mockery of one of His blessed huntin' mornin's, and He don't send many, I'll never throw my leg over a saddle any more. It's mons'rous. Why, do you know what I said last night to old Paunche ? I said, 'General, we're not swells, we're not ; we're not the Belvoir, and we're not the Quorn ; but if we can't show these Cockney sports a thing or two, I'll hand in my portfolio. General,' I said, 'we'll have out the ladies, and we'll have out those little fillies o' mine, every damned Broke of 'em'—those were my words—'and they shall show 'em the sort we are in the Parkshire. No pace, haven't we ! We'll give 'em twenty minutes on the grass, and if they can live with Vanity and our little Miss Muffits, I'll die a vegetarian. General,' I said, 'those little fillies are not fashion-platers, they're not, no new-fangledness in that stable ; they're not Hyde Parkers neither ; none o' your waltzin' on the tan ; and they are cut nearly as pretty about the muzzle as their uncle Charles, but when they are out for blood they'll have those door-handles o' theirs in front of the devil, or they'll know the reason.'"

Lord Bosket paused to reinforce his eloquence with a further application of his "mixture." While he was thus engaged his six young nieces bent wistful eyes upon their

mother. They could no longer keep a cloak over their feelings, and were compelled to lower their pride a point. Their faces were brilliant now ; and the lustre of their eyes, which no stoicism could repress, came near to lending them the glamour of which nature had deprived them. Their mother, observing it, wished a little sorrowfully that the secret was hers of evoking it at all times and seasons. All the same, she did not relent.

Lord Bosket, stimulated to new valour, returned to the attack. He was nonplussed, however, by a demeanour which, gracious as it was, remained impervious to anything so gross as the invective of a male relation. Broke was with him entirely, as he was as a rule where his girls were concerned ; but had not his ideal demanded that he should remain a neutral, experience had taught him that woman was a creature over whom human reason, even when dispensed by man, the fount of it, was not likely to prevail. Besides, you do not look to Hannibal to usurp the functions of the drill sergeant. Therefore he was content to restrict his championship of the cause so gallantly espoused by his brother-in-law to grim laughter at the points made by that intrepid sportsman.

“ German philosophy,” said Uncle Charles, thrusting his hands in his pockets and growing quite querulous. “ I thought you were a woman o’ sense, Jane, but you are a stable companion to Emma. The mornin’ I married that woman there might well be a change in the weather. Edmund, there’s been a mistake. Jane and I ought to have been born the other way about. You and I would ha’ got on together like a house on fire. We’d be huntin’ the fox all day and playin’ double-dummy bridge all night ; while Jane and Emma could be sittin’ in a Methodist chapel readin’ the *Spectator*. There’s been a mistake, old son. It would ha’ been such a simple thing for that damned fool Nature to handicap us accordin’ to the code—weight for age and a five-pound penalty. But no, she must try something fancy, and a pretty mess she’s made. There are poor old knackers that can’t push one leg before the other and have never won a plate, that have got their ten pounds extry,

and there are smart young three-year-olds that don't carry an ounce. I never saw such handicapping in my life."

Thus the Right Honourable Charles Chevenix, thirteenth Baron Bosket of Hipsley, in the kingdom of Great Britain. With incorrigible *naïveté* would he meander amid his woes, this victim of fate, who yet appeared to take a maudlin pleasure in his lot.

Wherever sportsmen met his name was a household word. On the racecourse and at the covert-side in personal popularity he stood next to the Heir Apparent. Of every form of manly exercise he was the patron and high priest. No stony "ped" or drunken "pug" ever sought his aid in vain. He met the acute pecuniary need of many a fallen angel and light of other days. Himself no anchorite, he dispensed largesse among all sorts and conditions of men. He never asked who or what they were, but accepted all men as they represented themselves to him. The mere existence of such a one was an evil in a decently conducted state. He was an offence to morals and political economy; a fosterer of the idle, the worthless, and the corrupt; a patron of all forms of vagabondage on which the sun saw fit to shine.

Having delivered a short excursus on his own hard case, a permanent injustice that called for ventilation every day, he returned to that special tyranny under which his nieces were suffering. It called loudly for redress. When he took an idea into his head he could be very tenacious; and again, having no-family of his own, Broke himself hardly cherished the "little fillies" more tenderly than he.

"Jane," he said, with a very knowledgeable air, "I suppose you know that Wimbledon is likely to be home, and he may be comin' over to-day from Hazelby?"

"Ah, our poor Harry," said Mrs. Broke in a motherly voice. "That's rather surprising. He is so seldom anywhere since he lost poor dear Mary. Besides, I thought he was at Davos."

Lord Bosket thought so too, but, like Brer Rabbit, "he lay low and said nuffin'," for it was plain to see by a new animation in the manner of his sister that the case was

altered. The Duke of Wimbledon's public appearances had been so rare of late that for one in the position of having six penniless girls to settle in life it was almost an affront to Providence to ignore them. Therefore in something under three minutes the inexorable lady had made a concession—a particularly graceful one to be sure. After all, it *was* a fine morning for hunting; the girls *must* be encouraged to preserve their sovereign health; Hegel's Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion *could* wait until they returned. But they must promise to be home early.

"Yes, mother," said Joan.

There was a fine spirit in her eager face as she rose from the table.

"Delia," she said, "please go and tell Simkin to have Persephone, Pat, and The Colonel ready as soon as he can."

"Come here, little gal," said Lord Bosket, grabbing Delia as she was hastening to obey orders. "Give your Uncle Charles a kiss. Nice, shy little filly, is it? I told 'em to put a saddle on your new gee, Twopence out o' Threepence. Pretty bit o' stuff. Have a look at him when you go down, and see if he's all right. You people are so almighty particular, that you hardly fancy anything under a National winner."

"Dear Uncle Charles!" cried the other five, circling about him on their way to the door. Next to their father and their brother he ranked as their good comrade. It delighted them to pay the toll he exacted of one and all.

By what mysterious means their mother's iron resolve had been softened so suddenly they did not know; nor did they try to learn. It was enough that they were going out hunting after all; and that their Uncle Charles, notwithstanding that he swore so, and was always calling Porson to replenish the whisky jar, and that he had the funniest way of talking that ever was heard, was just about the dearest and kindest man and uncle in the world. Of course, their father was excluded from this generalization. The deities are very properly barred in a comparison of mortals.

"Those are what I call gals," said their uncle as soon as they had gone; "keen as the wind and fresh as the day!

Jane, if you go spoilin' those nice little fillies by makin' 'em clever, you'll be sorry. You've got to marry 'em, remember."

A demure smile was his recompense for this sage advice. Presently he lowered his voice in a confidential manner.

"Talkin' of marriage," he said, "I heard the other day that things had been fixed up between Billy and that Wayling gal. You had better give me the office, because I've got a pony on it."

"I think, Charles, the announcement is at least a little premature."

Mrs. Broke's smile was as placid as her eyes, but she had brought to perfection the art of affirmation by denial. Her brother laughed.

"I've lost my pony all right. Jane, you *are* fly. So you've hooked the heiress. It's what you've been wantin' this many a day. How you've kept body and soul together all these years I'm damned if I know, as I said to Salmon the other night. Hooked the heiress, have you? You've missed your vocation, my gal. If you had taken those brains on the Turf, you would have made a bit. Suppose I had better congratulate you; you too, old son."

Husband and wife laughed without resentment. They were used to a frankness for which their relation was famed from one end of England to the other. Besides, they could afford to be good-humoured. A much-coveted prize had recently come within the grasp of a bitterly impoverished family.

Lord Bosket grew pensive; indeed, the nature of the subject threatened a further recital of his domestic sorrows. Happily his nieces returned in time to prevent it. They were equipped with habits which seemed to date from the year One, and with bowler hats battered into all shapes save that of the original, and dating no doubt from the same period. Fashion, however, did not count in their case. From head to heel they had the indefinable look of the "workman." They might well appeal to the inveterate sportsman who furnished many a lofty description of them to the world at large. As well as being bred to the saddle they

had been bred to the fields. They were as natural as any creatures there to be found.

Uncle Charles took them round to the yard to expound the points of Delia's horse, "Twopence out of Threepence"; also those of a new purchase of his own, "Apollo by Apollinaris," which he proceeded to do with a childlike gravity that endeared him more than ever to his audience. They then bore off their Uncle Charles to see the badger, regaling him by the way with another stirring account of its capture. Afterwards were submitted to his inspection a ferret, a stoat, a fox, a weasel, a mongoose, and innumerable dogs, doves, and horses, not to mention an old stable cat blind of one eye: a formidable family of pets which he had to review about three times a week.

CHAPTER III

ONE OF THE DIE-HARDS

WHILE Broke and his attendant Dianas are negotiating hedges and ditches in the February thaw, it may be well to look a little closer at his material state. In person fine and lusty, he was the embodiment of feudalism, as was to be expected of one whose passion for the land had congealed the temper of his mind into the clogging thickness of his native loam: Had you dug over his mind with a spade, nothing would have been turned up in it save the immemorial lust of possession, the pride of race, the abasement of spirit before the soil, which even at this day rendered him as foremost an Englishman as any, although a little paradoxically, considering how our enlightenment has been vaunted in the eyes of others, he still remained the essential type of the Briton of the days of Froissart and Chaucer.

To reconcile such a one to his day and generation was impossible. Nothing; not his wife, not his friends, not his circumstances, not experience itself, conspire as they might, could reconcile him to the heresy that at the dawn of the twentieth century of the Christian era, pounds, shillings and pence had superseded more picturesque considerations in point of virtue. He could not bring himself to believe that a picturesque lineage was of less account than a knowledge of arithmetic. To him the idea was as fantastic as it would have been to the mind of his fathers, that a tradesman could pass for a gentleman. It hurt him to think that a man's income was a touchstone of merit. Why be at the trouble to trace your lineage from a Norman robber or a Saxon one if for a small monetary consideration

anybody could derive theirs from Charlemagne, or good King Arthur, or a husbandman and landowner of the name of Adam? Why have a handle to your name if it was open to all the world to buy its nobility as it bought its mutton, and every pedlar pushed a seat in the House of Lords before him on his barrow? In vain was his voice uplifted with the ducal bard:

Let wealth and commerce, laws and learning die,
But leave us still our old nobility.

Alas! that lyrical cry wrought no consolation in his tormented spirit.

On the other hand, to do him no injustice, Broke's conception of his own figure in the world was no unworthy one. His acres, his status, his hereditary merit were very precious in his sight. He safeguarded them as jealously as his foxes, his blood stock, his turnips, and his daughters. Like the ancestral ivy they gave colour to an edifice otherwise substantially plain, yet unlike it they were possessions which his creditors had not the power to touch.

Pride, says the moralist, is a weed that flourishes in a barren soil; certainly it waxed upon Broke's poverty. A very stalwart of a man, torpid with beef and ale, his constitutional misfortunes were a little overwhelming. Perhaps the first of these was the hour the gods had chosen to impose his personality upon a slightly amused, a slightly irreverent world. As a feudal baron he would have been a complete success, but in his capacity of plain country squire in the last days of Victoria, with the habits of his ancestors at the mercy of a pecuniary need they had not been schooled to endure, the figure that he cut was hardly so heroic as his bearing. You do not expect a king to have holes in his coat. Poor Broke minus his timber and with heavy mortgages on his property was so thinly clad that he could be seen to shiver every time the wind blew.

Those of his neighbours who challenged his pretensions with a few of their own, acquired in several instances with the painful and recent suddenness of their millions, were given to watch the spectacle with shrewd enjoyment. The

nearest of these, the wealthiest, and incomparably the most audacious, was a certain Lord Salmon, the latest thing in peers, who had the knack of expressing his views with point and freedom. "Edmund Broke is one of the Die-hards—perfect father and husband, domestic laurel crowns his visionary brow, and all that sort of thing. But there are no joints in his backbone. He can't bend. He'll be worth watching when the crash comes."

Broke's judgment on the adventurous Salmon contained more clinching expressions. A man who in his own words "began life with a barrel-organ and three white mice," who dared to put a price on Covenden itself, at ten per cent above its value in the market, "because when a place suits my fancy, money's no obstacle," was a person too irresponsible to be worthy of censure. Rather he should be laughed at temperately. But Lord Salmon was too successful to be laughed at. Broke, therefore, had recourse to the weapons of the weaker party. He damned his eyes.

Salmon replied by an affront to civilization. He built a mansion in the Victorian style. The lord of the manor could no longer range his demesne oblivious to the House of Salmon. For the seat of that august family had been raised on an adjacent hill, part of which was appropriated turbary. The place was a paradise of sanitation. It was equipped with every modern inconvenience, at once amazing and American, lighted with electricity and heated by steam, a really high achievement in discomfort, blushing in red brick. Lord Salmon, however, retained his self-possession through all this relentless grandeur. It hardly excited him at all. His candour was as superb as his insouciance. He still remained the humorist he had always been. He acknowledged as freely that Toplands owed its being to the Semitic genius of Saul, first Baron Salmon, as that the patent of nobility of Saul, first Baron Salmon aforesaid, was the interest on the sum of fifty thousand pounds invested discreetly in the funds of the Party that most required it. In apologizing for the unavoidable absence of his ancestors he took a simple-minded pleasure. "One can't have everything, you know," he would say with quiet resignation.

“Life has not been ungenerous on the whole. We keep a yacht at Cowes and a few horses in training. We dine at the Carlton and hunt with the Quorn. We have a moor in Scotland and a river in Norway. We don't lack for friends ; and Lady Salmon says she has quite a horror of paste. As for my ancestors, I am a man with a Tribe.”

Salmon was the antithesis of his neighbour. He was beginning ; Broke was ceasing to be. He had ideas, intelligence, boundless energy ; Broke was mercifully delivered from inconveniences of this nature. Broke's was the sturdy limitation of mind, the admirable bovine absence of temperament of the true John Bull. The one embittered the life of his head keeper ; the other was a country gentleman. The one endowed hospitals and homes for working men ; the other contracted debts he had not the wherewithal to discharge. Salmon was a promoter of public companies, cool and audacious, a bland and splendid personage ; whilst Broke was uncompromising in his gait, matchless in dignity, azure of blood, and very thick, consequently sluggish ; a caricature of a type, but not without some of the saving graces of his order.

It was an open secret in the county that Broke was on his last legs. Two and two had only to be put together. The depreciation of land-values was a heavy factor ; and again, the aristocratic instinct is not to be gratified throughout a term of centuries without sooner or later Threadneedle Street asking for better security. If only he live long enough even the feudalist has to submit to the discovery of coal under the virgin soil. The Brokes, a good freebooting family, had been able to live in purple and fine linen in the good old days. They took their own where they found it. But other times, other ways of life. Under Victorian statutes the strong hand was liable to be interpreted as a felony. The strong brain had superseded it. Persons of an ingenious turn, the Salmons for example, arranged their “booms” and their “slumps,” “rigged” their markets, “floated” their “companies,” knew how to be a “bear” and when to be a “bull,” rented Park Lane, had their little places in the country, a convenient distance from town ; and were

able with their wealth to menace and oust the county families, or what they liked better, to force them to compromise.

The fusion of blood and brains was the first condition. The Brokes struggled without avail. The Salmons held the power and did not hesitate to wield it. The Brokes must perish or submit. The philosophers among the *ancien régime* clenched their teeth and intermarried with the bloated plutocrat; the astute among them compromised the matter by taking in matrimony the fair and well-found daughters from across the Atlantic, on the plea that every American woman is a queen in her own right—a doubtful compliment to a democratic country which yet seemed to please it very well. The Brokes of Covenden, those stubborn Die-hards, sought in the meantime to pursue the even tenor of their way, entering into alliances only with those whom they were pleased to call “the right sort,” a term of an admirable vagueness suited to the character of their ideals.

Mrs. Broke, with her penniless and uninteresting girls to provide for, was at the end of her wits. She was too keenly alive to the exigencies of the age to have scruples as to what direction they married in; but the poorer Broke grew the more exclusive he became.

In the matter of her son, however, the dauntless lady had already achieved a success, in spite of the restrictions under which she laboured. The wealthy and beautiful Miss Wayling of Calow, the last of a line celebrated in song and story, mistress of Calow Court, and Crag’s Foot Priory, Long Shafton Hall, and still better, one-fifth of a northern coal county, was a young woman of fabulous eligibility. She was indeed a match; and if report was true, her heart was thrown into the scale with her other attractions. A young woman of character, report said also. Was ever such luck as this young man’s?

When her family had at last gone to hunt the fox, Mrs. Broke was able to give her attention to the remainder of the morning’s post. Of three letters that claimed her notice one was in the handwriting of her son, whilst the two others, directed to Edmund Broke, Esq., were of a business character and came therefore within his wife’s cognizance.

Her son's letter, written in the style so characteristic of its writer, was to inform his mother that a brother officer, one Dicky Sykes, having had the misfortune "to take a toss and smash his shoulder to blazes," was compelled to give up polo for a time. He was selling his ponies in consequence, and was prepared, as an act of friendship, to part with a couple, "the pick of the basket," for a "monkey," in other words five hundred pounds, "on the nail." He, the writer, was almost ashamed to take them; it was almost like getting them for nothing; but in spite of the modesty of this sum his allowance, as he had pointed out so often to "his dear old mummy," could only cope with difficulty with the bare necessities of life, and as a couple of polo ponies, however essential to man's well-being, hardly came within this category, he hoped "his good old mummy" would let him have a cheque by return. In a rather illegible postscript occurred these words: "I don't want you to get fussing about Maud and me. She is above my paper."

As Mrs. Broke read this letter she laughed, also she sighed a little. There was a softness in her eyes that might have surprised her daughters very much had they been able to see it.

The other letters were a little more prosaic. The first was as follows:

"EDMUND BROKE, ESQ.,—Dear Sir, I beg again to call your attention to the fact that your account is overdrawn considerably in excess of the security we hold. I am instructed by my Directors to inform you that it is impossible to permit this deficit to be increased. I am further instructed respectfully to urge you to reduce it without delay. The undersigned would be glad to arrange a personal interview at your early convenience. I am, Dear Sir, yours very faithfully, per pro Marr's Banking Company Ltd., JAS. B. CHAYNEY."

The second was a little more to the point:

"EDMUND BROKE, ESQ.,—Sir, We were much surprised to have this morning the enclosed cheque on Marr's Banking Company Ltd. returned to us endorsed R.D. Unless we

receive a remittance for the full amount (£103 16s. 5d.) per return of post we shall be compelled to take steps for its immediate recovery. We are, Sir, your obedient servants,
DENISE ET CIE."

Mrs. Broke was neither surprised nor embarrassed by such concrete examples of that which continually threatened them. She knew they were on the brink of ruin. For many a weary year had she been paring cheese to the last desperate farthing, and here at the end of the period the spectre loomed ever larger.

When Broke returned dog-tired late in the afternoon, she had a talk with him in the library, as soon as he had had time to take a bath and change his clothes. The letters were laid before him.

The dispirited man sank into a chair.

"I don't know what to do," he said feebly. "I am always trying for another mortgage, but land goes for nothing now. Denise et Cie? Who are they?"

"Those absurd Presentation dresses. But you would insist on them."

"Yes, yes," said Broke gently. "But how do people live on nothing?"

"We have been doing it, Edmund, for nearly thirty years. We shall be obliged to let No. 3 this season, or if we can find somebody to take it, I think it would be better to do things thoroughly and sell the lease."

"I was afraid of that."

"I am sure not more than I. It is so necessary for the girls."

"Poor beggars!" said their father, with an odd tenderness. "Not much of a show for them. And now they will not be able to have their bit of a season."

"I think Emma may have Delia at Grosvenor Street for May. They will all be out then. She may have one of the others also. Emma has a good heart."

"But even if we give up No. 3 I am afraid it will not help very much. However, I will see Breffit to-morrow. And by the by, the sooner Billy is married the better."

"I quite agree with you."

"He is not like the girls. I have not too much confidence in that fellow. We might find him with his heels over the traces some fine morning. He is careless and extravagant."

Mrs. Broke demurred with a little sigh. Maternal tenderness had not the heart to subscribe to such a strong opinion.

"Obstinate, headstrong; you have to watch that sort. It would be nice for us if he came the same sort of cropper that Charles did. I think you remember Charles?"

"Well, ye-es," said the sister of Charles, with a slightly forced laugh.

The allusion was to the Right Hon. Charles Chevenix, thirteenth Baron Bosket, in the kingdom of Great Britain, who at the present tender age of his nephew William had regaled his friends and shocked the democracy of his country by plighting his troth with that of Miss Maisie Malone, a star of the Light Comedy Theatre. How Mr. Charles—it was in the time of his father, the late peer—started on a tour of the globe on the very morning that the noble lord arrived at the lady's residence in St. John's Wood attended by his lawyer and a blank cheque, a tendency to apoplexy, and a natural flow of English of great pith and fluency, and how the sum of ten thousand pounds became the amount of the indemnity, was a page of the family history to which Mrs. Broke was still unable to turn without a shudder, although it had been written years and years ago.

"I would lose no time in getting him fixed up," said Broke. "We shall not be safe with that fellow until there is a halter on him."

Mrs. Broke gave him the young man's letter.

"I fancy he won't get his ponies," he said, and upon reaching the postscript added, "Why, the fellow's a fool. He don't know what's good for him. I can't understand a chap in his senses shying at a girl like Maud. Her mother was a Fitzurse; the Waylings were on the roll of the Visiting Justices; she's a catch for anybody. The fellow's a fool."

"Yes, but a rather pleasant fool."

"A reckless fool. A fool who don't care. Had you

knocked the nonsense out of him regularly as you have done with the girls, we should not have him giving himself airs in this way."

His son's letter had touched the autocrat.

"I think, my dear, you overstate the case. I am sure neither Billy nor the girls would think of acting contrary to their own interests."

"Well, waste no time. I've not much confidence in the fellow."

With this final expression of his wisdom Broke dissolved the conference.

"If the girls have come down," said his wife, "will you please send them here? And, please, tell them to bring their German dictionaries."

"Poor beggars!" said their father as he went out of the room.

He had a deep-seated pity for his girls. He felt the sharpest pinch of his circumstances when he reflected that they had to suffer privations to which, could his own feelings have been consulted, he would have been the last man in the world to condemn them. Then their mother ruled them with a rod of iron. It was doubtless for their good; but all the same he did think she was a bit hard on them sometimes.

The girls filed into the library with deep apprehension. In the field fear had hardly a meaning; but this room flanked with shelf upon shelf of old grim tomes over which the stern spirit of their mother presided, was the abode of terror. However, this afternoon there was a respite to their real sufferings, a somewhat painful encounter with the German language, while their mother read aloud that portion of their brother's letter that she felt concerned them.

"Your father says he cannot find him a penny more than he receives at present. Have you a suggestion?"

Had Billy desired the moon, the female members of his family would have endeavoured humbly to purchase it for him with their pocket money. Even his mother could relent where he was concerned. As for his sisters, no sacrifice was too severe could it gratify his lightest whim. He was the lineal descendant of their father; the shining qualities of

that god and hero among mankind had been transmitted to his son, the heir of his name and fortune, and also of his immortality. Their loyalty was of the unflinching quality that generations of their race had rendered to the king. Billy could do no wrong. To them he was absolutely perfect: the kindest, bravest, cleverest brother in the world.

“We could sell some of the hunters,” said Joan. “Two or three of the thoroughbreds, Pat, Whitenose, and The Doctor might be worth five hundred pounds.”

She spoke without hesitation. Her sisters regarded her with admiration. She was of the uncompromising type which cheerfully forfeits its right hand should the occasion ever arise. The others hugely admired this fibre in her, and were prepared to follow her lead anywhere, since they had all been cast in the same heroic mould.

If to prove the rule an exception is insisted on, it must be the youngest, Delia. To be sure, she was but a child. But again and again the other five, whose mature years ranged from eighteen to four-and-twenty, had been forced to confess in their hearts that they had no confidence in Delia. They were afraid she was not quite one of them. They had to be very strict with her. There was something delicate, impressionable, something that you might even call poetic and rather foolish about her. She had longer eyelashes than any of them, and they curled up at the ends in the oddest manner. Her eyes, too, were bluer than anybody's, bluer even than Joan's, with a queer filmy sort of thing hovering about them, that gave them a look of mystery. When a thing like that hovers about your eyes it is hard to tell what you will be at next. She had been convicted of several misdemeanours already, although she was such a baby in point of years. It was still fresh in their minds how that morning she had contrived to disgrace herself on her birthday. Nor could you ascribe such a lapse wholly to her age. At no period of life could Joan, Philippa, Harriet, Jane, or Margaret “have made such a perfect silly of herself.”

Once they had found her in tears over a fairy tale; and

on many occasions she had shown a tendency to read books of her own accord. Once she had missed her tea because she was reading in the library. What sort of book it was that she read they did not know, but that it exercised a pernicious influence upon her mind there could be no doubt. Solecisms she had committed already ; but she would have committed others, they were sure, and graver ones had they not sat on her constantly and snubbed her dutifully from her earliest youth. For try as she might to conceal the fact, they *knew* that she kept ideas of her own. Doves and pigeons and the thousand and one delectable things the law allowed them to keep did not suffice for *her*. Indeed the severest thing that lenient man their father had said of any one of them had been said of Delia. He said that had she been a boy she might have grown up to be a Radical.

CHAPTER IV

LORD CHESTERFIELD TO HIS SON

THE next morning Broke rode over to Cuttisham to see his agent. He was in a despondent mood. As he drove through the February mist, and the rain trickled into his skin, and his horse plunged up to the fetlocks in mire that had borne his name for as long a period as history was able to keep a record, his thoughts were bitter. Look which way he might there was no light to soften the gloom of his affairs. Like the sky itself, their sombreness was all-pervading. His lands were rotting under his feet; his house was tumbling about his ears. Gates were unhinged, hedges broken, farms tenantless, fields lying sterile for lack of the things he could not afford to buy. All was symbolical of the decay of him and his.

Never did a man feel more powerless in the grip of circumstance. He was not cast in the mould that can grapple with two strong hands at the throat of destiny. He had been born with a silver spoon in his mouth; if he was hungry, he opened his lips, and lo! he was fed. He was accustomed to discharge all his obligations to the outside world by the simple and excellent expedient of a cheque on his bankers. His forebears had been accustomed to doing it before him, ever since banks were invented. It was their way, therefore it was his. It was unreasonable to ask him to seek another when one which had the sanction of long use was altogether to be commended.

Look at the matter as he would, he did not see what he could do to retrieve his position. If he farmed his own land he lost his money; and to induce others to farm it for him

was not easy in the present state of agriculture. But a man must live, and a Broke must live spaciously. In this age of the plutocrat and the parvenu the world looked to such a one to keep a light burning.

His mood was no lighter when at last he came into Cuttisham, the county town of the shire. Two out of three of the passers-by touched their hats to him, and tradesmen saluted him at their doors, but this deference brought no balm to his spirit. If anything it made him the more depressed. He rode solemnly through the town, until he found himself in a thoroughfare a little narrower, a little cleaner, and a little more somnolent than those he had traversed already. It bore the name of High Street; and was the locale of the post office and the bank; of the lawyer and the doctor; of the club and of various charitable societies; and above all it contained the office and abode of that remarkable man Mr. Joseph Breffit.

As the sun is to the solar system, in that relation did Mr. Breffit stand to the social and economic life of his native place. He was the luminary around which all things revolved; the fixed star in the local firmament, without whose sanction it was hardly possible for the world to be carried on. There was nothing too great or too trivial to be outside the sphere of Mr. Breffit's interest. If a subscription was opened for a charitable object, his was the first name upon the list. If the Lord-Lieutenant of the county gave five pounds, Mr. Breffit gave ten; if the Lord-Lieutenant gave fifty pounds Mr. Breffit gave a hundred. If a drunkard was sent to prison for a week Mr. Breffit was on the bench to send him there. Afterwards, if he expressed a wish to reform, Mr. Breffit got him admitted into a home for inebriates. If subsequently he grew more licentious in his habits, Mr. Breffit distrained upon his goods for rent; if less licentious, Mr. Breffit took him into his employ. If he died, Mr. Breffit furnished the money for his burial out of the insurance policy he had taken out in the company with which Mr. Breffit was associated. If he absconded, Mr. Breffit signed the order for the committal of his wife and family to the workhouse.

When a distinguished person came to Cuttisham it was as the guest of Mr. Breffit. If a lecture was given in the town hall Mr. Breffit occupied the chair, and it was Mr. Breffit who introduced the lecturer to the audience in a few homely but well-chosen words. During those seasons when the local members were constrained to loose the arrows of their oratory, Mr. Breffit sat at their right hand on the platform, taking precedence even of the Mayor and the county magnates. It was his inalienable privilege to say "Hear, hear" in the forensic pauses of these masters of political ineptitude three times as often and twice as loudly as anybody else.

Cuttisham was proud of Mr. Breffit, and Mr. Breffit was proud of Cuttisham. He knēw everybody, and he knew everything; pre-eminently he knew how many beans made five. He was a land agent primarily; he was also a lawyer, an insurance agent, a dealer in stocks and shares, a breeder of cattle and horses, a banker, a brewer, a landed proprietor. He was a philanthropist and a publicist, a justice of the peace, a guardian of the poor, a churchwarden, a county councillor, a colonel in the volunteers. In all weathers, in all seasons, a tall silk hat, a white waistcoat, and a pair of highly polished brown boots, were three articles indispensable to his attire.

Not only did Mr. Breffit know the business of everybody in Cuttisham almost as well as his own, but he knew that of the great ones of the earth who dwelt in the county. Further, he conducted it. Nor was it their business alone with which he was acquainted. He knew the worth and extent of their properties, the personnel and Christian names of their respective families, their balance at the bank and their armorial bearings. Also he knew when the first cuttings were planted of their genealogical trees. It was his boast that he was brought into perpetual contact with the nobility and gentry. And as even the most hard-headed and successful men are prone to undervalue the privileges they enjoy and unduly enhance those they do not, so Mr. Breffit, who had wealth and a keen intelligence, held these as light in comparison with what he called "blue blood."

Now the one among his clients to whom the gods had been most liberal in this mysterious quality, without a doubt, was Mr. Broke. Persons there were better endowed with mere things of the world; persons of a more generous culture; persons of title; persons more distinguished in the public service; persons of a wider intellectual range; persons who paid far more for services rendered; but there was not one among them all whose acquaintance Mr. Breffit valued so highly as that of Broke of Covenden. He felt that in reserving for Edmund Broke, a plain country squire, the first place in his esteem, he honoured himself. It would have been so easy to reserve this particular niche for the master of Hazelby, or the Earl of Croxton, or one among the humbler or more recent creations who flourished in the shire. Mr. Breffit flattered himself that where one of less perception would have been captured by mere externals, he was by way of being a connoisseur. Compared with the Brokes, their neighbours were only people of yesterday.

When the Squire of Covenden arrived at the plain brass plate that kept the entrance to Mr. Breffit's office, that gentleman was seated in his private room in the company of his son. The father, small, grey, wiry, without a superfluous ounce of flesh upon his bones, had an almost boyish eagerness of demeanour which sprang from a mercurial temperament. It was to the peculiar quality of this temperament that he owed his success in life. A many-sided man of affairs, a man of numberless interests, it was the feverish energy with which he threw himself into them that enabled him to bring them to a successful issue. He pursued the art of turning an honest penny with the ardour that belongs to genius. His was the invaluable secret of producing blood from a stone.

The son did not present the pregnant points of the father. Doubtless they were not there to start with; but even if they had been the public school and the University had already done much to efface them. A clean-limbed, well-groomed, cold-eyed young man, he had rather supercilious good looks and perfect health.

Father and son were engaged in an important conversa-

tion. The son was at the threshold of a career. Since completing his third year at Cambridge in the previous June the young man had spent a month in the cricket field, a fortnight with the grouse, a fortnight with the partridge, a fortnight with the pheasant, and divers fortnights in town doing the music-halls and the theatres, and in visiting his friends and the friends of his friends. He was now about to settle down under his father's eye. In the exalted sphere into which his polished manners and his immaculate person were destined to lead him, his father hoped that honour would accrue to them both.

"I've money, my boy, and I've money to spare," Mr. Breffit the elder was saying. "You'll never need to make a penny for yourself; so I don't see, my boy, really, why you should go into business at all. Speaking frankly—I am about to speak to you, my boy, very frankly—I think it better that you should not. Not that there is any disgrace attaching to it nowadays, of course. The old-fashioned prejudice against 'being in trade' and that sort of nonsense is dead. To-day even the best people are bringing their sons up to it, aye, and are going into it themselves, where a generation ago they would have scorned the idea. But I don't intend that you shall touch it, my boy. Safer not to, depend upon it, safer not to. You see, at present you are merely the son of old Joe Breffit; until you have felt your way as it were, and are properly launched as a country gentleman, it will be better to run no risks."

Breffit *filis* nodded his head complacently. The scheme "would suit him down to the ground." His talents qualified him eminently to do it justice. Breffit *père* drew his arm-chair closer, lowered his voice, and continued in a whisper of unction and mystery.

"You see, I want you to be just the gentleman, my boy. That's the trade for you. Just the gentleman. You ought to be able to manage that to a nicety, considering the pains I've taken to make you one. You will not lack for money, as I've said; and you've had a very expensive education. You've got friends of the right stamp already, and you'll have more, my boy, and better, if you will only learn to play

your cards. Stand over there by the window, my boy, where the light's a bit clearer, so that your old father can have a look at you."

A little sheepishly Mr. Breffit the younger yielded to his sire's enthusiasm. No artist in his studio held his glasses to his nose with a more deliberate discretion, nor cocked his head more lovingly to one side, nor manœuvred his distance more cunningly to survey a *chef-d'œuvre* than did Mr. Joseph Breffit before this masterpiece he had himself created. He rubbed his hands.

"Capital," he said, "capital!"

"Dash it all!" said the young man, reddening awkwardly.

"You look real Ar, my boy, you do indeed. If I didn't know better I should take you to be the son of a gentleman."

The son looked at the father, and laughed with a slight air of constraint. There seemed something strange, almost uncanny, about a father like that.

"I only hope, my boy, that you will not neglect your opportunities. Nature has been good to you, and things in general have been good to you, and a lot of money has been spent on your education. A man cannot send his son to Harrow and Cambridge without having to pay. But I do not grudge a penny. It has been my aim that you should make the right sort of friends—the sort of friends that will get you on in the world. Now all I ask, my boy, is that you make the most of your opportunities. Do that and I am prepared to pay a lot more. I have got my eye on a place in the county that is just coming into the market, a regular fine place, Tufton Hall. Poor Lord Algernon Raynes, brother to the Duke of Wimbleton, you know, is having to sell it lock, stock, and barrel. People say it's speculation on the Stock Exchange, but I know better, and so does Mrs. Dingley. Now I am thinking of renting that place or buying it possibly, with the cellar, the pictures, the furniture, the stud, the shooting, and all the bag of tricks. It will be useful for you to have a place where you can entertain your friends. Besides, it will give you a sort of territorial title: young Mr. Breffit of Tufton Hall, eh, what? Now, what do you say to it, my boy? Sound idea, don't you think?"

Mr. Breffit paused with his hands on his knees, a look of eager interrogation in his face. The son smiled with a serenity that had a touch of condescension in it. But he seemed to think it was a sound idea.

“ You see, my boy, Cuttisham is well enough for old Joe Breffit, but it will hardly do for you. Therefore I want you to give a wide berth to the townspeople, as you will find the people do among whom you are going to live. When in Rome you must do like the Romans, you know. For you will be on sufferance among them until you have married one of them and lived down the prejudice against you. There will be a great deal of prejudice, my boy, at first. You will find it uphill work, with all your fine college friends, to make good your footing, and be received among them as their equal. For uppishness there is nothing in the world to beat your old county family, especially when it is encumbered with a short purse and a long pedigree. ‘ The poorer the prouder ’ is its motto.

“ There are the Brokes of Covenden. Of course, they were a great family once : important people at the time of the Norman Invasion, friends of William the Conqueror and that sort of thing. But they are no more than a name now. They don't count a snap of the fingers as things go nowadays, and they are as poor as the mice under the wainscot of a Methodist chapel. But for pride, my boy, for cold-drawn pride, I should say that Lucifer compared with Mr. Broke is as humble as Uriah Heep. I know him, and he knows me, but only in the way of business. He looks on me as being no better than a shopkeeper ; and although I have been the best friend he and his have had for thirty years, he thinks I am little better than his butler. Mind, my boy, I am not saying a word against him. I admire him for it. But that is the sort of thing you will have to fight. It is no use people making money in Cuttisham and then setting up to be gentlefolk in his neighbourhood. If I was a Broke and had been in the landed gentry for a little matter of a thousand years, more or less, I should be the same. I could afford to keep my pride then, even if I could not afford to keep my timber. Therefore, my boy, you will understand

why I want you to dissociate yourself from Cuttisham. Your old father will be the greatest enemy you will have to face."

"Not at all," said Mr. Breffit the younger with excellent politeness.

"It is very good of you, my boy, to say he will not, but I know better. Your neighbours will find it harder to forgive you for being the son of old Joe Breffit than if you had murdered your mother. And you really must keep clear of the townspeople. Only this morning I saw you talking with young Porter, the son of Porter the bookseller."

"Oh, that chap," said Mr. Breffit the younger, with an inflection in his voice that delighted the parent. "He went up to Trinity with a scholarship."

Breffit *père* stood aghast.

"You don't mean to say that that fellow, the son of Porter the bookseller, was at Cambridge too?"

"Oh, yes," said Breffit *fils* rather mournfully.

Breffit *père*, as if to wipe away his incredulity, rubbed his eye-glasses, which he wore by a gold cord round his ear.

"I never heard such a thing; it's monstrous. What can the fellow's father be about? You can depend upon it, my boy, that trouble will come of it. I never yet saw people set up above their station in life without they learnt to repent it. The next time I am in Porter's shop I shall express my opinion. But really, one would have thought a place with the standing of Cambridge would not have admitted that class of person."

"Oh, there's all sorts, you know," said Breffit *fils*. "Some extraordinary people you find up at Cambridge, I can tell you. Why, lots of them haven't been to a public school."

"Ha!" said Breffit *père*, breathing heavily. "What a pity! One would have thought an ancient seat of learning of that kind, with its traditions and its history, would have been as exclusive as possible. It is sad to think that it throws its doors open to Tom, Dick, and Harry. It is not surprising that mere learning is not thought so much of as it used to be. If I had only known of this sooner you should have gone to Oxford."

"It is just as bad there," said Breffit *fils*.

"You astonish me. One always understood that our older universities were solely for the education of the sons of gentlemen."

There was a considerable pathos in the voice of Breffit *père*, as one overwhelmed by disillusion. And in his face was incredulity. However, in the flood-tide of this emotion there came a knock on the door of his room.

A junior clerk appeared.

"A gentleman to see you, sir."

"Name?"

"Mr. Books, sir."

"Mr. Who?"

"Mr. Books, sir."

"Never heard of the man. I can't see him now; he has not an appointment. Tell him I'm engaged, but if he cares to wait I'll see him presently."

As the boy closed the door and retired to convey the information to the unexpected visitor, Mr. Breffit observed, "One of those pestilent fellows touting for encyclopedias. One is not safe from anybody these days."

CHAPTER V

A PRIVATE VIEW OF THE FEUDAL SPIRIT

WHILE the modern Lord Chesterfield continued to impart those elements of behaviour which are so necessary to the English gentleman, the grand exemplar of his teaching, flower of the British squirearchy, *sans peur et sans reproche*, the mirror and the consummation of what he wished to see his pupil waited in the ante-room in his wet mackintosh, twirling his hat in his impatient hands. The temper of the paragon was hardly at its best. It had been sorely tried of late. When he left Covenden that morning it had been a little out of its normal plane; and now, as he sat with a pool of water forming round his feet on its descent from his clothes, he felt his vexation swell about him drop by drop, in the slow proportion of the lake upon the floor. It was an experience for one of his pontifical spirit to be kept at the door by his agent. Such a thing had not happened before. It was a trifle, yet somehow it went against the grain. It was too impalpable to resent, yet it fretted his sensitive machinery like a speck of dust in the eye.

Mr. Broke was a familiar figure to the clerks who thumbed their ledgers behind their lattice-work of glass. With nobody was the Guv'nor so replete with flummery, not even with the Duke, the Bishop, and Lord Croxton, as he was with this red-faced man with the big nose and the great voice, who looked like a farmer. The Guv'nor gave you pins and needles all over, he fairly made you squirm, he did, when he put on his fancy manner and buttered it thick with this Mr. Broke of Covenden. With trepidation they began

to note that a cloud was darkening the brows of the great man, and that he beat his knee with his riding-crop in a way you couldn't mistake. At last his impatience grew so marked that one of the clerks whispered to the boy who had taken in his name :

“ Porter, you told the Guv'nor it was Mr. Broke ? ”

“ I thought he said his name was Mr. Books,” said the young clerk nervously.

“ Then the Guv'nor don't know he's 'ere. Go and tell him it's Mr. Broke, you young fool. My aunt ! I wouldn't be you.”

The unlucky junior, a younger son of Porter the bookseller, who had been in his present situation a fortnight, bore this information into the inner office in a state of distress that drew broad grins from his peers. In almost the same instant that the news was communicated to him Mr. Breffit bounced out of his room.

“ Oh, my dear Mr. Broke, how very annoying ! A thousand apologies—a thousand apologies ! Pray, sir, come in. I was not aware that you were waiting. That stupid boy misunderstood your name. Terribly provoking—terribly provoking ! But upon my word it shall not occur again.”

“ Don't mention it, Breffit.”

Mr. Broke did not seem particularly grateful for this balm for his feelings, but looked steadily past his agent towards the young man, whom he had never seen before, who stood at the end of the room with his back to the window.

“ My son, sir—pray allow me to do myself the honour of presenting my son.”

There was a note of inexorable pride in the voice of the father. However, so preoccupied was Mr. Broke that this somewhat florid introduction had to be repeated before he grew aware of it.

“ Your son, Breffit ? ” he said at last, “ ah, yes ! I was not aware you had a boy so old. Let us hope he will make as good a man as his father.”

“ He will make a good deal better, sir, I hope and trust,”

said Mr. Breffit proudly. "My father didn't send *me* to Harrow and Cambridge."

"Harrow and Cambridge!—oh, really," Broke murmured almost involuntarily.

"You see, sir," said Mr. Breffit, "I have given him the education of a gentleman because I intend him to be one. I have more money than I shall ever want for myself, and I intend to invest it, sir, in this boy of mine, so that he shall hold his head up with the best, and be a credit to me."

"Ah, yes," said Broke.

As he spoke, a shade of annoyance passed across his face. Talk of this kind was painfully out of harmony with his ideas. Let the cobbler stick to his last, was an article of his faith. What would become of the social hierarchy if this sort of thing went on in England, of all places in the world!

Mr. Breffit, as keenly he scanned the face of the grand exemplar to learn the effect of his audacity—alas, that his instincts proclaimed it to be so!—was only too quick to detect the sinister light in his eyes. He hastened to remove what he divined to be the cause.

"I hope you won't consider, Mr. Broke," he said, "that I have been guilty of rashness. I thought out the matter years ago, and I should certainly not have given my son an education of this kind had I not intended to keep him in affluence, sir, afterwards. You see, Mr. Broke, he is the only boy I've got; he is my all, do you see, sir; and I want to be able to look up to him and say, in the words of Shakespeare, the immortal bard, 'This is a Man!' And, Mr. Broke, I may tell you in confidence, between ourselves, sir, that my boy will be one of the first men in this county. It won't be up like a rocket and down like a stick with him. He will be a very rich man."

Pride and enthusiasm had seized the father. A darling scheme had been cloistered in his heart these many years; and now for the first time, as it burst into the articulate, he was overwhelmed. Yet even as the vaunts started from his lips he knew that had he been in the full enjoyment of that control, that sanity he had the habit of exacting from himself, he would never have inflicted his personal affairs on

one whose condition rendered him unsympathetic. Nature, however, cannot always be the slave of policy. For once she had proclaimed herself boldly in Mr. Breffit. He was slightly bewildered; he was rather disconcerted; he had a faint sense of humiliation as Broke confronted him with compressed lips and sombre eyes.

The aspect of the paragon was solemnity itself; it was not his habit to inquire into the aspirations of those who served him. Nor was he there to attend a recital of Breffit's fantastic ideas. Odd ideas they were too—on the verge of moonshine. Really, it was not at all like him! Rather pointedly the manner of the great man showed that he was not there to discuss the private affairs of his agent. For once, however, the man of tact, the courtier, was obtuse. Now that the long-imprisoned torrent had forced those flood-gates in his soul it must gush out until it had run dry.

“I hope you don't consider me unwise, sir, in putting such notions in my boy's head. You see, I am going to buy Tufton Hall, poor Lord Algernon's place, for my boy; and I'm going to set him up in it, with ten thousand a year of his own. And if that's not enough, he can have more, sir. I don't intend that there shall be any doubt about his position; and although he is the son of a self-made man—I know what *I* am, Mr. Broke—I fail to see that that should be anything to his detriment. He will have his stake in the county just like anybody else, although he may not, like some, be adorned with blue blood, or have a handle to his name. And I hope, sir, that presently, in the fullness of time, he may marry in a direction that his means will justify, and stand for Parliament and that sort of thing.”

The face of Broke was a study. Had his mood been lighter he might have been content to be amused. There was something comic in such an outbreak in a man whom he had known for thirty years as a sane, discreet, responsible fellow, who had never shown a tendency to presume upon his worth. But he had no mind to laugh at anything this morning. He was annoyed. He was annoyed in much the same way as he would have been had Porson bent over his chair during dinner and whispered, “I can recommend the

brown sherry, sir!" Could it be that old Breffit's mind was giving way a little? Or, again, this amazing behaviour of old Breffit's was the result, perhaps, of this money-curse that nowadays was making hay of everything. As soon as a man got money, no matter how he came by it, he seemed to feel that the mere possession of the demoralizing stuff lifted him out of his class. As though money made any difference! What these absurd people could not see was that a man was what he was; you could not make a silk purse out of the ear of a sow.

"Breffit," he said tartly, "I have very little time to spare, and there is something of importance I wish to talk about. I am afraid we must discuss it alone."

The son withdrew with a flush of anger. He was stung by the tone. He went the more hurriedly because his father, instead of resenting it, began to cringe before it, and was actually breaking forth into apologies. This pompous, overbearing old bird was "a bit of a blood" apparently; but fancy the Guv'nor taking it like that! A matter of business, he supposed. Lucky for him he would not have to go into business! Insulting old bounder!

When the door had closed upon Breffit *fils*, and Breffit *père* had been somewhat rudely summoned out of his day-dream by the rasp in the voice of his client, Broke plunged without further preface into the matter that had brought him there.

"I am in a tight place," he said. "No. 3 Broke Street will have to go. I should prefer to sell it."

"A great pity," said Mr. Breffit, with an immediate resumption of the official manner, "a great pity."

"I agree with you, Breffit, but I am afraid there is no alternative. I understand that further mortgages are impossible, and I must have some ready money. The only thing is to let No. 3 go the way of the rest of the property. Fifty years ago the whole street belonged to my father; yet now, as you know, this is the only house in it that still belongs to us."

"Purchaser preferred, I believe, sir?"

"Yes; do you want to buy a town house for your son?"

“Not at present, sir, not at present,” said Mr. Breffit, upon whom the attempt at irony was lost. “But that will come all in good time, I hope and trust. And in the meantime, sir, I think I can find a purchaser.”

“You are a wonderful man, Breffit. Whom have you in mind?”

“Well—er, Lord Salmon,” said Mr. Breffit, with a becoming measure of hesitation. “I am sure Broke Street would suit his lordship. He is looking for a house a little more commodious and in a neighbourhood a little less doubtful than that of his present residence in Berkeley Square. And he would prefer to buy. I happen to know he doesn’t care to rent anything, except a box at the Opera.”

“Why don’t the fellow buy Buckingham Palace?”

“Indeed, sir, why not? But perhaps the Queen wishes to retain it during her lifetime for the sake of its associations.”

This absence of mental guile had been an asset in Mr. Breffit’s career. It was an aid and a stimulus to men of Broke’s mould, whose sense of humour was broad and primitive.

The name of Lord Salmon was the proverbial red rag to this typical John Bull. Nothing was so distasteful to him as the mention of that peer. Even the word Radical was not such a frank offence. The fellow was always obtruding himself one way and another, and there was no limit to his presumption. The effrontery that could put a price on Covenden was capable of all things.

“He shall not have it.”

Mr. Breffit shook a deprecatory head.

“I am afraid,” he said, “we are hardly in a position to be nice. We are fortunate, sir,—highly fortunate—to have the prospect of even one purchaser who is at all likely to buy it on our own terms. To Lord Salmon money is no obstacle.”

“So he has been good enough to say, provided a place fits his fancy,” said Broke, with a grim face.

There could be no doubt that the draught was bitter. But the old and trusted family physician had decided that the

sick man must swallow it, in spite of the wry faces that he made.

"Believe me, Mr. Broke, if you really must part with the house it would be suicidal to throw away a chance that is not likely to recur. Had Lord Salmon dropped from heaven he could not have appeared at a moment more opportune."

"Devilish good of him."

Broke's face was a sufficient acknowledgment of his ineptitude. It fretted him to the soul to be at the mercy of this Jew. Even the nationality added to the sense of humiliation; he had the fierce contempt for the Chosen Race of his ancestors in the Middle Ages.

"I—ah—suppose you—ah—must use your own discretion, Breffit," he said, with a reluctance that laid his feelings bare. "You—ah—must dispose of the house to the best advantage. I—ah—leave the matter entirely to you."

The agitated gentleman mopped his head.

Mr. Breffit had not been slow to observe the conflict in the face of his client; and his tenderness for him was very real. In a curious impersonal way he had a profound reverence for Broke, and it was not made less because he had such an intimate knowledge of the character of his idol. Provincial in his outlook, Mr. Breffit was not a fool. There were certain kinds of things in which he was by no means superficial. He could read Broke's prejudices like the page of a newspaper.

He saw the man's pride was bleeding. Never before had he seen it so distressed. Indeed the sight was so pitiful he could hardly bear it.

"Mr. Broke," he said, "will you—er—permit me to make a suggestion? I dare say we can adjust this little matter without—er—having recourse to Lord Salmon. I think I see my way to taking over the house as an investment against the time my son marries and enters Parliament."

He was prompted by one of those odd bursts of disinterestedness that may sometimes overtake even a keen man of business. The idea uppermost in his mind was to spare the feelings of his client. And he might have succeeded but for that unlucky clause in regard to his son,

which was no more than an afterthought and a sop to his commercial instincts. Therefore the suggestion jarred upon Broke in much the same manner as if it had been made by a thrifty footman who had come forward with an offer of pecuniary assistance. It was not easy to play the philanthropist with a man of this kidney.

"Breffit," he said, "I leave the matter entirely in your hands. It—ah—ceases to interest me."

Suddenly he laughed discordantly and held out his hand.

"Good morning, Breffit. Let me know the price. And remember that time means a great deal."

However, as he moved to the door, Mr. Breffit detained him.

"I have been asked, sir, whether you would accept a seat on the board of a limited liability company. If I may say so it is an easy way of adding five hundred a year to one's income. I should not have mentioned it, sir, only nowadays numbers—numbers of men of the highest standing—do it constantly."

"What is the name of the company?"

"The Thames Valley Goldfields Syndicate. I may say that your brother-in-law, Lord Bosket, has signified his intention of joining the board after allotment."

"Indeed; who has prevailed on him?"

"Well—er—I rather think the promoter."

"Who, pray, is the promoter?"

"—Er—Lord Salmon."

"I—ah decline to have anything to do with it."

Broke took a sharp step to the rain.

When Mr. Breffit had bowed the great man from his door and had watched him mount his horse and ride away into the mists of the High Street, he returned to his room with a very grave air and rang the bell. It was answered by the youthful clerk who had been guilty of such a terrible blunder. Mr. Breffit put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a number of silver coins. He spread these out on his open palm and selected two half-crowns very sorrowfully.

"Porter," he said, "here are a week's wages, and please consider yourself as no longer in my employ. Such a

thing has happened through your carelessness that had not occurred in all the course of my professional experience. My oldest and most respected client ! Mr. Broke of Covenden, of all people in the world ! Go at once, Porter—go before I say something harsh.”

The boy, looking very white and frightened, opened his lips to make some desperate sort of a reply. Before he could frame it, however, Mr. Breffit stopped him with a magisterial finger.

“Not a word, Porter. There is nothing to be said.”

Tears were in the eyes of the boy. He murmured something, but the only words that were audible seemed to relate to his father and the disgrace.

“It is a disgrace, that I grant you, Porter. As for your father, I have no idea what he will think, but he ought to feel it. By the way, that reminds me ; you can tell your father for me, Porter, that he is a very foolish man. I understand he has sent your elder brother to Cambridge. It was brought to my notice this morning for the first time, or he could have depended on it that he would have heard from me sooner. I don’t know whose boy we shall see there next. Has Gage the greengrocer sent his boy to Cambridge too, or is he wanted at the shop to take round the potatoes and the cabbages ? When I was a boy our universities were reserved exclusively for the sons of gentlemen. But your father will live to repent it, Porter ; I never yet saw a man give false ideas to his children without having cause to regret it. Now go ; and mind you don’t apply to me for a character.”

The boy placed the five shillings in his pocket and withdrew. He put on his mackintosh, tucked his office-coat under his arm, and went forth mechanically in the direction of his father’s bookshop. He was as stunned as if he had received a blow on the head ; he could think of nothing ; and although it was pouring with rain, he stood gazing a full quarter of an hour into a pastrycook’s window, which, being now to let, had not so much as a tart to relieve its air of desolation.

CHAPTER VI

FORESHADOWS THE NEED FOR A HERO AND A HEROINE

WHEN Broke rode home, care still sat behind the horseman. A brougham, drawn by a fine pair of horses, rolled up and down in the rain before his door. He did not need to look at the coronet borne by this vehicle to learn to whom it belonged. It was more familiar to him than consisted with his peace of mind.

He found his family already at luncheon. To-day there was no meet of the Parkshire Hounds; and the solace was accorded him of his wife, his six daughters, and his brother and sister-in-law.

"We are taking luncheon a little earlier to-day, Edmund," said his wife. "There is a meeting of the Cuttisham Temperance Society at the Town Hall at a quarter to three. Emma is going to preside."

"Supported by me," said Emma's spouse in a somewhat low-spirited manner. "Lucky me; doosid nice to be me—what?"

"Charles," said Lady Bosket, focussing her tortoiseshell glasses six inches from her nose.

Lord Bosket added dismally a little soda water to his whisky.

Lady Bosket was a tall, gaunt woman with large features and high cheek bones. Her countenance, however, might be compared, perhaps ungallantly, to that of a hen. Not one of your plebeian barndoor species, but rather a variety of game-fowl, a very superior, high-stepping hen. Superiority was, indeed, her prevailing note, the key in which she

had been conceived. Everything about her proclaimed it. Whether it was the way in which she wore her back-hair, or the prose with which she enriched English literature, she was invariably a *précieuse* who conveyed the impression that she was one apart from the vulgar herd.

It was reserved, however, for her voice to be her crowning glory. As a peal of bells may enhance the nobility of a cathedral whatever the splendours of its architecture or the venerable aggregation of its years, so that remarkable mechanism gave the last touch to the personality of this lady. And to pursue the sacred figure to which we have ventured to compare her, which after all is the one designed to please her most, her voice, like that of the cathedral, was right up at the top.

"Edmund," said his sister-in-law, "allow me to congratulate you upon Billy's engagement. It is so clever of Jane. I am sure it takes quite a load of responsibility off the shoulders of us all."

"You appreciate, Emma, of course, that nothing is settled yet," said Mrs. Broke. "At present it is a little premature to speak of it as an accomplished fact."

"People are talking of nothing else," said Lady Bosket. "Everybody agrees that it is so providential. People are unanimous in your praise, my dear; everybody knows that poor dear Harry wanted to marry her."

"Good luck, my dear," said Mrs. Broke placidly. "They were always fond of each other, even when they used to fight in the nursery."

"People say, of course, that the keenness is mostly on her side. Still, it would be rather too much like a novel, would it not, if it were on both?"

"Has it not occurred to you, my dear," said Mrs. Broke, "that mutual affection comes after marriage as a rule? All the most perfectly harmonious unions I know have begun in that way. Surely it is best that marriage should begin on the mere ground of common tolerance. It is so much safer, isn't it? Before marriage mutual affection seems a little incongruous. One feels it to be a slight forcing of the note."

“How does it strike you afterwards?” inquired Lord Bosket.

“You are a cynic, Charles,” said his sister archly. “You should be like Diogenes and live in a tub.”

“Wish I could. Pretty good judge o’ the game, that old feller. No room for two in his little box.”

“Miss Wayling is a charming girl,” said Lady Bosket in her most detached voice. “And she has a beautiful nature. She has that statuesque marble purity which is so full of Greek feeling. How one welcomes such a refinement after a surfeit of the athletic, “horsy,” unfeminine creatures that one meets everywhere at the present day.”

Lady Bosket had recourse to her glasses, and ingeniously manipulated them in such a manner that she could stare at all her six nieces at once. Five of them quailed before the resolution of her gaze, but Joan, the eldest, the one with the Roman spirit, happened to be drinking a glass of water. She suspended that operation and met her aunt’s scrutiny with a fearless one of her own.

“Auntie means that for you little gals,” said their tender-hearted but extremely tactless Uncle Charles, who was so sensitive that he was hurt by anything that gave pain to things for which he had an affection. “That’s a dig at you; but don’t you mind it. I’ll bring you some chocolates to-morrow; you know—the sort in the pink boxes tied with blue ribbon. And I’ll lend you Bobtail when she gets her leg all right.”

He sighed, and helped himself reflectively to whisky.

“Charles!” said Lady Bosket.

It was Mrs. Broke’s constant aim when these near relations honoured her with their presence to remain a neutral, and to steer the conversation into channels unvexed by the waters of controversy.

“What is going to be done with Tufton? Have you heard, Edmund?”

“Breffit told me this morning that he was going to buy it,” said Broke.

“For whom?”

“For his son.”

“For his son!”

Mrs. Broke was frankly incredulous.

“Who, pray, is Breffit?” asked Lady Bosket.

“Surely you know Breffit the land agent,” said Broke.

“I thought everybody knew old Breffit. He is a character.”

“The weird old thing who wears such outlandish clothes,” said Mrs. Broke. “In his way he is the most famous man in Parkshire.”

“Oh-h,” said Lady Bosket, drawing a deep breath.

“The old man who is always so painfully polite,” said Mrs. Broke; “who always has a finger in every pie and always seems overcome by emotion when he talks to one.”

“That man!” said Lady Bosket. “That old humbug. Do you mean to say he has bought Tufton, that the Raynes’s have had for generations, and that he proposes to put his son in it?”

“I do,” said Broke grimly. “He was good enough to tell me this morning that he was going to set his son up in the county in such a manner that he could hold his head up among the best.”

His sister-in-law elevated her high shoulders piteously.

“I am only repeating his words,” said Broke, with a cold chuckle. “I had the honour of an introduction to the young chap this morning.”

“My *dear* Edmund!” said Lady Bosket.

“I dare say Mr. Breffit intends that you shall act as his sponsor in his progress through the social world,” said Mrs. Broke, whose smile had gained in lustre. “When the worst comes to the worst and we are cast penniless upon the streets, as I suppose we must be in the end, we shall be able to keep body and soul together by playing Mentor to these young Telemachuses. You, my dear Edmund, will be allotted the department for the social advancement of the sons of local tradespeople, while I can open a bureau for the presentation at Court of the American Miss, with auxiliary branches for the polishing of Popper and Mommer. And I can fill up the rest of my time with the introduction to good society of all and sundry; and you, my dear Edmund, can fill up yours as a director of public companies under

the aegis of our friend Lord Salmon, which reminds me that I have already made a promise to him that you will accept a seat on the board of the Thames Valley Goldfields Syndicate, in consideration of which act of grace you are to receive the sum of five hundred a year."

"My dear, you are growing quite debased," said Lady Bosket.

"What is that, Jane?" said Broke gruffly. "You have made a promise to—ah that fellow Salmon? Why, Breffit approached me this morning on the—ah same subject, and I refused point-blank. What can you be thinking about!"

"The butcher and the baker, the rates and the taxes, my dear. Five hundred a year *is* five hundred a year to paupers like ourselves. Lord Salmon has very kindly promised to come this afternoon to discuss the project with you."

"I decline to see him."

"Don't be more impracticable, my dear, than you can help."

"Shorten rein a bit, old son," said Lord Bosket. "Salmon is not half a bad feller. People can say what they like, but you can take it from me that Salmon's all right. He preserves his foxes and turns down his birds, and he don't play a bad hand at bridge. He don't pretend to be a Nimrod in the saddle, but when he bags a keeper he always does the handsome thing. Nobody can deny that he drives good cattle, aye, and owns it too, and he pays his footin' to the Hunt like a sportsman."

"He paid his footing to the peerage also. No—ah Salmons for me, thank you."

"Woa, easy, easy!" said Lord Bosket in the caressing voice he used to his alarmed young horses when they pricked up their ears and began to prance at the automobile. "Easy, my boy. Everybody's got to have a beginning; even you had to have a beginning. If a horse is a pretty good goer, and he don't shirk his fences, there is no need to worry about the stud-book. Take my word for it, Salmon's all right. I'm goin' on the board myself."

"Charles, I forbid you absolutely to do anything of the kind," said Lady Bosket.

"Jane," said Broke, "that man must not come here. Better not know him."

His tone was so oddly yet unconsciously like that of his sister-in-law that his wife laughed.

"Really," said she, "I think Charles and I are both old enough to take care of ourselves."

"Edmund, I hear you are giving up Broke Street," said Lady Bosket.

"Your information is correct, Emma. I placed the house in the hands of Breffit this morning. It will presently pass to those of his son or this fellow Salmon. I wonder what my poor dear father would have said had he lived to see it. Thank-God he did not!"

"So at last you submit to the inevitable," said his sister-in-law, without a spark of pity, notwithstanding that Broke's tone of contempt was plainly intended to cover his distress. "Of course, it ought to have been given up years ago. It is incredible to me that people in your circumstances should have kept it on so long."

"You forget the girls, my dear," said Mrs. Broke mildly. She was too well used to her sister-in-law's love of hectoring her poor relations to resent speeches of this kind. "The girls had to come out you know."

"One fails to see that their London seasons have helped them. They would have done just as well to stay in the country along with the horse-flesh and save the pence of their parents. It seems a mere waste of money for country girls to have a season in London unless they are clever, or rich, or pretty."

"Dash it all, you would have 'em presented, wouldn't you!" cried Broke, with vehemence. Now that he was so down on his luck he didn't mind how much the great lady rode the high horse over him, but she had to be careful how she disparaged his girls.

"Is it necessary for the daughters of people as poor as you are to be presented, Edmund? One would have thought that if they learnt nursing or gardening or household management that might be more to the purpose."

"Not be presented, Emma! I never heard such a thing

in my life ! I'm rather down on my luck I know, but it is not going to be said of my girls that they have not been presented."

"The disgrace would not be indelible."

"That is a matter of opinion, Emma, if—ah you will allow me to say so."

There was an odd light in the eye of Broke that his sister-in-law had not seen there before. His face too was remarkably red. But that of his wife, for some reason, was dissolved in laughter.

"Are they all out now ?" asked Lady Bosket.

"Delia is not," said Mrs. Broke. "I am sure I don't know what is to be done with her, poor child. Perhaps the Gaddesdens will have her just for May and the drawing-room. Their youngest girl is coming out too."

"Those people!" said Lady Bosket. "Jane, you amaze one. Don't you know they are in with the people who put advertisements of their doings in the illustrated papers?"

"Beggars cannot choose, my dear," said Mrs. Broke, with admirable meekness.

"Well, rather than that should happen she had better come to Grosvenor Street to me."

"How good of you, my dear!"

"Hold up your head, child."

Lady Bosket raised her glasses and looked at her youngest niece with a directness that Delia found to be embarrassing.

She was so much timider, so much more delicately constituted than her sisters.

"Rather nice eyes," said her aunt. "But she blushes a great deal too much. The Broke nose is not quite so much in evidence as in the others, but still there is more than enough of it. Edmund, I always say that the Broke nose is the ugliest thing that was ever borne about by a human being. I rather like the child's mouth; the upper lip is quite effective. Really, the family plainness is less aggressive than usual. Probably a little deficient in character. But, Jane, her clothes! The cut of that coat! Why *will* you not send them to Redfern, my dear?"

Lady Bosket lowered her glasses.

"If the child comes to me, I make one condition—I shall have her educated."

"Pray do as you choose, Emma, provided you pay the piper."

"Very well, as I have not a girl of my own she shall be taken in hand. It will be a luxury to have a niece who is able to distinguish between the differential calculus and the tail of a horse. She shall go to Newnham."

"The wretched child would never be able to pass the preliminary examination," said her mother, laughing.

"That can be remedied, my dear. She must have a coach. By the way, I know of quite a deserving person who has done very well at Cambridge; a man from this neighbourhood, whom in a sense I regard as a protégé of my own. He was in the bookshop at Cuttisham, and it was on my advice that he went to the university. I hear he has done remarkably well."

"Rather young for the—ah post, Emma?" said her brother-in-law, without enthusiasm. "Must be quite a young chap."

"Old enough, Edmund, to teach elementary mathematics. And to my mind it is a distinct advantage that he is not a gentleman."

"This optimism is unlike you, my dear," said Mrs. Broke, with a stealthy air.

"I wouldn't be too sure about that, Emma, if I were you," said Broke, with a grim chuckle. "You are never safe in these days. A man told me the other day that his under-gardener's eldest boy had just been called to the Bar. Fact is the old distinctions are disappearing."

Mrs. Broke gazed from her husband to her sister-in-law with the look of humour deepening in her face. She was still regarding the unconscious pair when the butler came into the room. He bent over her chair.

"Lord Salmon, ma'am, to see you."

Broke cocked his ears.

"We can't have him here, Jane," he said shortly.

Mrs. Broke's look of humour grew very broad indeed.

"On the contrary, I want to see him particularly; and I

want you, my dear, particularly to see him too. Show his lordship in here, please, Porson."

A somewhat arid pause heralded the expected arrival of the visitor. Broke glared stonily and his sister-in-law was able to say before the door opened again: "Jane, on no account introduce him."

Mrs. Broke sat the picture of demure mischief, which yielded to effusive welcome at the announcement of the distinguished visitor.

CHAPTER VII

LE NOUVEAU RÉGIME

SAUL, first baron of his name, had a type of countenance likely to excite racial prejudice. Also he was fat to the verge of the obscene. His portrait in the newspapers inferred a composite photograph of M. Dumas the Elder and the Tichborne Claimant. His hair was black and curly, his mouth was large and coarse, his prominent eyes were yellow.

When this personage entered the room, Mrs. Broke gave him a hand of quite peculiar grace. However, such a reception was a little discounted by the coldness of her husband's nod, and by the fact that Lady Bosket appeared to be wholly unconscious of his arrival. Her spouse, however, waved his hand in a fraternal salutation.

"How are you, Bos?" said Lord Salmon.

"How do, Fishy!" said Lord Bosket reciprocally, lifting his glass. "Chin, chin!"

In the meantime Mrs. Broke, with that almost cynical supineness she could display when she had a purpose to serve by it, was prevailing very winningly upon Lord Salmon to sit down to luncheon.

"You must please forgive us, Lord Salmon," she said, in a tone that was very like flattery, "if we should seem a little peremptory. The fact is, Lady Bosket and I are due at Cuttisham Town Hall at a quarter to three, to attend a meeting of the Temperance Society."

"I'm goin' too," said Lord Bosket. "Drink is the curse of this country. We must put it down."

"Temperance," said Lord Salmon. "Excellent thing. Can I help you?"

"My *dear* Lord Salmon," said Mrs. Broke. "Indeed, I can say of my own knowledge it is a very well administered and thoroughly deserving charity. Really, my dear Lord Salmon——"

"Don't mention it, ma'am. Fix the amount."

"A hundred guineas——?" Mrs. Broke beamed upon the eminent financier.

"Make it two, ma'am, make it two; it's all the same to me. I spend fifty thousand a year on advertisement."

"Well, my dear Lord Salmon, if you positively insist——"

Lord Salmon's first act upon sitting down at the table was to produce a cheque-book and a fountain-pen from the breast-pocket of his coat, and to draw a cheque for the sum in question. While this operation was being performed, Broke and Lady Bosket gazed piteously at one another across the white expanse of table-cloth, somewhat in the manner of two belated missionaries who, by stress of circumstances, are compelled to sit down among cannibals and take a little something to eat.

When Lord Salmon had written the cheque, he looked up to encounter the arctic glance of Lady Bosket. Her glasses stuck out rigidly in front of her. She was engaged in the Amazonian feat of looking straight through him. But the Titan of commerce, the audacious and brilliantly successful man of business, is not very easily disconcerted, nor has he much use for the fine shades.

"Ha! Lady Bosket," he said, with an affability that made the stately lady draw in her breath, "delighted! Know you by reputation, of course. Ennobling work that last of yours. Lady Salmon's charmed. That's not idle flattery, I assure you; very sincere woman my wife. She would be very pleased to know you; why don't you call on her? You've a friend in Lady S. You should come and see us. Only too delighted to see you at Toplands any time. Bring Bos. Know Bos very well, of course. Heard the chimes at midnight, haven't we, old son?"

At this point Lady Bosket turned to the butler.

"Porson, my carriage."

The majestic woman rose, and without a word or a look

to the right or to the left, marched out of the room. Her glasses were borne rigidly before her as a sacred emblem is borne before a deity. A silence that could be felt prevailed round the luncheon-table, while carriage wheels were heard to approach on the gravel of the drive, and presently were heard dramatically to die away.

As the noise of wheels receded slowly up the avenue, Lord Bosket lifted his head to listen. He drew a deep breath.

"That's all right," he said. "No foolin' around in the paddock this time. Porson, the whisky."

He then turned to Lord Salmon. As usual he was prepared to apologize humbly lest anybody's feelings should be hurt.

"You mustn't mind the missis, Fishy. It's only her fun. The papers are backin' her for the Immortal Stakes on the strength of this new book. If only she'd run 'em now there might be a chance for a poor old perisher like me. By the way, Fishy, the stable tells me that Swinburne II is a certainty for the March Handicap. I've got a bit on both ways myself."

Lord Salmon wrote the name of the horse in his pocket-book.

"Right you are, Bos," he said, "and here's something for you. Bull California Canned Pears and Iridescent Soap Bubbles, and bear Mars and Jupiter Rails."

It was now the turn of Lord Bosket's pocket-book to appear; Mrs. Broke also produced memoranda of her own. Her brother's "dead certainties" sometimes had the disconcerting habit of culminating in a non-starter; but "inside information" from a prince among company promoters was a horse of another colour.

In the meantime Broke had not favoured his guest with a word. Long ago he had made up his mind about him with the judicial deliberation upon which he prided himself. Salmon struck to the roots of his faith. What would become of the world if one of this kidney bounded impudently, like Harlequin from heaven knew where, into the middle of the social order? That fellow Gladstone, with his franchises and universal suffrages had something to answer for.

Here, in the person of this man Salmon, was the plain answer to the fanatics who put political power into the hands of the democracy. The sight of this Jew ruffling it in a Radical coronet made his gorge rise. They couldn't even respect the sanctity of the peerage. You could see by the way the fellow flaunted his cheque-book that he felt that money was the master of the world.

Mrs. Broke, although she was able to read her husband's prejudices like the page of a book, was as bold as she was shrewd. Therefore she did not swerve an inch from the course upon which she was set. She informed Lord Salmon that Broke had accepted a seat on the board of the Thames Valley Goldfields Syndicate.

My lord rubbed his hands.

"Capital!" he said. "Felt sure you would, my dear Broke. Fact is, you get something for nothing, and even the aristocracy don't object to that—what? Wonderful qualities—eh, in filthy lucre? I could have put lots of my friends in, of course; but now I've my stake in the country and a seat in the Lords I must look after my order. It seems a pity that people like you, who have done so much for the country, should have to go to the wall. Besides, we want you, Broke. You put on the brake when those fools at Westminster have lost control of the steering-gear and we are coming downhill a purler.

"Now I've staked out a pretty big claim in this island; and in giving you a leg-up I'm looking after myself. People say I'm a philanthropist. Maybe; but I don't lay down a penny unless I see a chance of taking up twopence in exchange for it. It pays to be frank in these days. There are too many simpering, self-righteous fools tip-toeing about the earth pretending to be "pi" for that sort of stunt to be reaping a very rich harvest just now. Pharisaism is played out. But this is talk, and I have to catch the three-twenty to town. You don't fancy me at present, Broke, but you'll take to me better in time. A fair chance is all I ask, and I'm sure you'll be the first to own that there is something in the new order of things. For I like you, Broke; we must keep your breed alive in the country. And I'm going to

make it my business to see that we do. Good-bye. I hope, ma'am, you will call on Lady S. She'll be charmed."

Lord Salmon rose as he ended his speech. Having shaken hands with his hostess, he bade adieu to everybody else with a cordial wave of the hand and made his way out of the room.

"Rum beggar," reflected Lord Bosket as soon as the door had closed. "But he's a sportsman from his head to his hocks. And he talks sense. Don't be so damned uppish, Edmund, but give him a chance. Feller's genuine. I've seen worse than that fat feller—lots! What's your opinion, Jane?"

Mrs. Broke declined laughingly to be drawn.

Luncheon over, she announced her intention of setting forth to Cuttisham Town Hall, in the wake of the outraged Emma.

"Charles, you are coming, of course. You have promised to support Emma on the platform, you know."

"Oh, go hon!" said her brother, leering at the glass in his hand in the manner of a music-hall comedian. "I should look well stuck up on a pedestal among sky-pilots and devil-dodgers, shouldn't I? It's a thousand to five the missis would give 'em the tip, and they'd put up a prayer for me."

"But you promised to support her."

"She'll be able to support herself all right; she's got a bit of steam to work off over this job, poor old gal. She'll give it tongue this afternoon. Her speech is typewritten very nicely. It has already opened two bazaars and laid a foundation stone and launched a battleship, to say nothing of bun-worries and Sunday School treats. Funny idea some people have of a treat. Not that she is not clever, you know, in her way—devilish clever. You can't help admiring the old gal. The critics say her new book is quite equal to Shakespeare."

Mrs. Broke deemed it wise to set out alone, leaving her brother in the care of her husband. After smoking their cigars they went for a walk round the farm.

The day being wet, the girls spent the afternoon in the room dedicated to their use. They called it their "den."

The name was not inappropriate, for had it been in the occupation of the brute creation its disorder could hardly have been worse. This temple of Diana was strewn with every kind of gear. Boots, coats, and hats; whips and spurs; gloves and stirrup-leathers; saddles and stray pieces of harness, and odds and ends of every conceivable sort were tumbled in heaps all over the room. There were pumps for bicycle tyres; skates, hockey-sticks, and leg-guards; guns and cartridges; walking-sticks and fishing-rods, reels, flies and tackle; in fact almost every weapon that becomes the hand of woman.

The walls of their domain were furnished with prints of a pronounced sporting character, and with the masks and brushes of defunct foxes. These were very numerous and very dusty, and they clustered so thickly all over the place that they made it look like a furrier's shop.

Under each of these trophies a label was affixed, bearing in a carefully executed juvenile handwriting the date, where found, the place of the kill, and the precise length of time in which the run was accomplished. Over the fire-place were pictures of their father in pink, mounted on Merry-andrew; of the meet of the hounds on the lawn of their residence, with Joan quite a grown-up young lady on a cob, and Harriet and Philippa looking rather silly on ponies, with their hair down their backs; while a third was a framed list of subscribers to the testimonial to E. W. A. C. B. Broke, Esq., M.F.H., M.P., D.L., J.P., which took the form of a service of plate, and a salad-bowl for Mrs. Broke, on the occasion of his relinquishing the mastership of the East Parkshire Hounds.

There were also various portraits of their Uncle Charles. One was a picture in colours from a paper called *Vanity Fair*, with the name of "Spy" in the corner, in which their uncle appeared in full fig, with a horn and a very long whip under his arm and a distinctly red nose, with his hands thrust deep in his pockets and just that kind-hearted querulous look about him that they knew and loved so well. And although the artist had drawn him such a funny shape, and painted his nose redder than it really was, somehow it

was for all the world like him, surrounded by hounds, with his legs straddled apart very wide, and hounds in between them, one of which they were certain was meant for "Halcyon" and another for "Harmony." This cherished picture was entitled "Bos." Then there was another, a more formal sort of likeness. It was hardly so amusing and so true to life as the coloured one, which almost had the power to make you laugh and cry. In fact this was not a bit like him really, he looked much too fine. It was from *The British Sportsman* and was called "The Master of the Parkshire."

Immediately below these pictures of their Uncle Charles they had nailed a whole page torn from a weekly journal. It was of a recent date, and was a vigorously written article called "The Trick Exposed." It criticized their Aunt Emma and her writings in a very frank and contemptuous spirit. It said there was not a single thought in all the writings of her ladyship which did not come of a very old family. It further said there was not a single thought in her writings that had not been better expressed by people nearly as well connected. It said the severe refinement of her style might have incurred the danger of being mistaken for a colourless nakedness had it not worn a coronet to cover its poverty. That was only one of the clever, witty things it said. There were places where it was flippant to their aunt; places where it chaffed her; places where it said all her pretension could not save her from the category of Mrs. This and Miss That, and the army of matrons and spinsters, who, instead of writing with the vulgar pen and ink of common people, wrote with singleness of aim and loftiness of purpose. Like those good ladies, said this wicked newspaper, she would be doing more for the amelioration of mankind if she would lay down her pen and take to darning her husband's socks. Fancy Aunt Emma darning Uncle Charles's socks! They had drawn a double line in red ink under that. They were sure the writer must have known Aunt Emma personally to have got in such a splendid stroke. And the review concluded in these words: "So long as to be dull is to be respectable, so long as a solemn decorum in art and life passes for wisdom and mastery, so long as narrowness passes for strength,

sterility of soul for refinement of emotion, vacancy of mind for a hyper-culture, so long as we are content to worship at the shrine of Mediocrity, however flat, stale; and unprofitable it may be, so long must we endure the standards set up by the Lady Boskets in the world of taste; and not only in art but in life itself we must suffer an ideal which has always proved acceptable to the provincial temper of the British nation."

Although the Miss Brokes were much too honest to pretend to understand the full meaning of this wonderful criticism, they had wit enough to know that it must be fine because when Joan read it out aloud in her strong and clear voice it sounded beautiful; also they knew it must be true because every word was strongly against Aunt Emma.

There was no signature attached to this piece of admired prose, however.

Again and again had Lady Bosket's nieces read that scathing criticism. They would turn to it for solace when newly from under the lash of her contempt. When it had left them bleeding, they would turn to it and with a keener zest go over every familiar line once more. Somehow on those occasions it seemed to do them good. Or if their Uncle Charles, the dearest, kindest uncle in the world, was more depressed and drank a little more whisky than usual, they would read it to avenge his wrongs. Joan, Roman-hearted Joan—Joan of Arc—was the special name her sisters had given her, so hugely was she admired for her high and inflexible spirit—Joan made it her boast that she knew every word of it by heart, and at a moment's notice could repeat it all, right through from the beginning.

This afternoon they had a painful duty to perform. Whenever the great authoress published a new work it was her custom to carry a copy to Covenden to improve the minds of her nieces. It is true a doubt always accompanied the Grecian gift; a doubt whether the pious object she had in view would be achieved. "I don't suppose you will read it," Aunt Emma would say, "but at least an effort must be made to rescue your minds from their debased environment." They were not at all clear about the meaning of the word

“environment,” but they were sure that no compliment was meant.

With a solemnity equal to the gift itself, her nieces, without a glance at the latest offspring of the gifted lady's muse, would take steps to be rid of it. They would burn the offending tome in the uncompromising manner that heretics were burnt of old. No victim of an *auto-da-fé* ever received his doom with a more ruthless gusto on the part of his executioners.

That morning Lady Bosket had presented them with the latest volume of her precious imaginings, humbly entitled *Weeds in the Grass*. She did not mean it, of course. But did it not savour of a delicate piquancy that the world-famous authoress of *Poses in the Opaque* should choose so lowly a name for any child of her intellect? Critical journals remarked upon it with a pleasant unanimity, and chid her tenderly for such a delightfully obvious deception.

It was printed on parchment and bound in white vellum. It was dedicated “To my Husband.” Critical journals remarked upon the essential simplicity of this lady, whose distinguished fate had not divorced her from a sense of the sacred nature of motherhood and wifeliness. She was devoutly domestic before the world. Critical journals remarked on that also, and pointed the moral for the more emancipated members of the sisterhood who went about with shrieks and battle cries, brandishing their pens and flinging ink. If she, a lady of unfaltering ideals and impeccable distinction did not hold the first and highest duties of her sex to scorn, was it too much to ask an alike humility of them?

Alas! that a flower so fair should be called to suffer so gross an indignity! No licentious print, no volume of sedition was committed more impressively to the flames of yore by the common hangman. In a group around it stood five of the executioners, whilst Joan, the sixth, suspended the offensive work in a pair of tongs by one of its virgin boards of white vellum. Candour and respect for the character of the authoress compel the admission that the tone of the martyr-volume was so blameless that it was fit

to be read any Sunday by any clergyman throughout the land in the bosom of his family. But the most spotless virtue never had a pennyworth of weight with fanaticism. That which could not avail La Pucelle and Dame Alice Lisle was powerless to defend even the pure and modest muse of Lady Bosket. One by one, in regular rotation and perfect order, the executioners circled, each in her turn plucking out a leaf and committing it incontinently to the fire ; and in the act they pronounced the incantation : " There, Aunt Emma, this is what *we* think of your horrid book ! "

CHAPTER VIII

ENTER THE TRUE PRINCE

A FEW days later, about ten o'clock in the morning Broke was riding to the meet of the East Parkshire Hounds. He was accompanied by his retinue of daughters, Joan, Harriet, and Margaret, whose privilege it was that day to be mounted in the traditional manner, with Philippa and Jane bringing up the rear, as became their humbler state, on bicycles. The gallant company had reached the porter's lodge which kept the gates of their demesne, when they were confronted with a rather insignificant-looking young man in a blue melton overcoat.

The first fact pertaining to the young man's appearance that struck their exceedingly acute feminine observation was, that the overcoat was old, and that the velvet collar that had been formerly an ornament thereto had now ceased to act in that capacity. He was a pale young man, decidedly under the middle height, with a head inclined to droop and rather too large for his body. Indeed, he wore an air of perplexity as though he were grappling constantly with the problem of how to bear about such a very big thing on such an inadequate vehicle. His shoulders, too, which had a bunched and rounded look, seemed to be burdened with the same responsibility. He was wearing a bowler hat that was a little battered and almost green with age; and in its relations with his head it seemed to share the disabilities of his person. It had the look of a cockle-shell jauntily poised on his thick brown poll, and at first sight it lent a suggestion of latent sauciness which if you happened to catch it at the proper angle was really quite funny.

Still, in point of fact, there was an almost pathetic absence of distinction about the young man's clothes and the way he wore them which would not have caused Broke and his attendant Dianas to bestow a second glance upon him had he not stopped and held the gate for them so that they might pass through. He then raised his hat with a diffidence the reverse of the fashionable and went his way.

As the cavalcade passed on, a single grim thought suddenly swept right through it.

So this was Aunt Emma's emissary! Poor Delia! Poor child! It had become almost a proverb that she was born unlucky. All the disagreeable things seemed to fall to her. The tutor realized to the full the picture already born in their imaginations.

The subject of their reflections had in the meantime passed on towards the house. Presently he was face to face with the imposing doors of their dwelling. An august old personage in a starched shirt and a swallow-tail admitted him. Subtle and indefinite signs seemed to indicate that the young man's appearance hardly recommended itself to the austere custodian of the family dignity.

During the five minutes in which the visitor was left alone in the drawing-room, a cold and rather draughty apartment, he picked up Edward Fitzgerald's version of the *Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám, which was lying on a table. Presently he was startled by a creak of skirts. He lifted his eyes to discover that a woman had entered the room. She was a red-faced, large-featured, rather countrified-looking woman, who might not have appeared out of place had she been keeping a stall in Cuttisham market. The instant the young man lifted his eyes and beheld her, her face melted in a bright smile.

"Even you, Mr. Porter," she said, with an easy promptitude, as though they were very old friends, "can bring your mind to these elegant trifles. I shall not be quite so much afraid of you now. I was trembling lest one of your attainments and an unlearned woman like myself should have no common ground on which to meet. You see, my sister-in-law has frightened me with your reputation."

The young man returned the smile frankly, and shook the gracious hand.

"You have come from Cuttisham," said Mrs. Broke. "I fear it is a long journey. But perhaps you have a bicycle, or you ride?"

"I prefer to walk," said the young man. "It is not more than four miles."

"That is eight here and home again. It seems a very long walk."

"Walking does one such a lot of good." The young man spoke almost apologetically.

"Without a doubt you are right, but I must prevail upon you to have some little refreshment after such exertion. A biscuit and a whisky and soda? A glass of sherry and a piece of cake?"

The young man was proof against these alluring things; but when he was conducted, presently, by Mrs. Broke to the library to make the acquaintance of his pupil, he was in danger of becoming her friend for life. The quarter of an hour he had spent with this singularly agreeable woman was an experience. She was so solicitous for his welfare, although she could hardly have known of his existence and had never set eyes on him before! It was as though this gracious matron with her dazzling smile and her beautiful voice were making love to him all the time.

There was a bright fire on the wide hearth of the library and a small brown, rather plaintive little figure was seated at a table before it. A sad little figure. There were several ominous blots drying on a page of Euclid's Second Book, which was open in front of her. Haloes of faint red shone round her eyes in the glow of the firelight. When the door opened and her mother appeared in the company of a person at whom Delia hardly dared to look, she flushed and rose timidly.

"This is your pupil, Mr. Porter," said her mother in her tone of ultra-graciousness.

The young man bowed. Delia returned the bow with a feeling of bewilderment. Almost in the act, the thought

flashed through her mind that this was the ugliest and oddest young man she had ever seen.

When presently her mother withdrew, poor Delia made no effort to dissemble her sense of persecution.

“ I have made up my mind to hate you, Mr. Porter,” she said, with a deliberation under which was her timidity.

“ Honesty ! ” said the young man, with half a smile.

In his eyes she was only a little chit of a thing with a russet-coloured face, nearly as plain and countrified as her mother’s. But it had much greater naturalness ; it had none of those ingratiating tricks that wrought so subtly upon the judgment. This was a face that had a kind of pathos in it ; and apart from a shyness that was rather nice, it had an air of perfect candour that was charming.

He liked the way in which she made her uncompromising statement. It was a curiously imperious little way, which yet seemed quite properly to be hers for all her shyness ; it was almost something you might associate with a fairy or a small princess of a reigning house.

“ Alas ! you have made up your mind to hate me,” he said. “ Ruthless, feminine justice, but very right.”

The young man’s laugh was not at all unpleasant, but Delia met it with resolute eyes.

“ I don’t think I blame you,” she said, with a fine little air of justice.

“ You hate me, which is worse.”

She still refused to relent, although his laugh did not jar upon her at all. In fact it was rather nice to hear him laugh.

“ I cannot help hating you,” she said.

“ Well, Miss Broke, I respect your candour.”

“ It is horrid of me, but I cannot help speaking as—as I feel.”

“ Alas ! ” he said, “ when I met your sisters at the lodge gates all talking so gaily, I felt I should not be forgiven.”

“ I will certainly not forgive you.”

The decision seemed to please him.

Delia clutched her book of Euclid, and tried to squeeze the

sudden tears back into her eyes. A fat one, however, stole forward on to the apple-coloured cheek.

“ Alas ! ”

The young man's sigh was as whimsical as his face.

“ I—I think you laugh at me. Please do not.”

“ On the contrary, I feel very sympathetic.”

“ Please do not—please do not feel sympathetic.”

“ I exceed my duties ? ”

“ Indeed, yes.”

“ Then what, pray, is to become of my mission ? Unless he is allowed to be sympathetic I am afraid this doleful clerk will never lead his charge to the Mecca of the faithful fair, the portals of Newnham College.”

The young man laughed. He opened a pair of eyes that were remarkably deep-set, and seemed to regard the stain that was slowly drying on the russet surface of her cheek with furtive amusement. Delia suddenly felt herself to be blushing horribly. In about the same instant she felt they were going to be friends. She had already been a little astonished to find herself talking to him so easily. Ever since the fatal day her aunt had made known the resolve Delia had felt sure she would be committed to the tender mercies of some grievous pedant. Her sisters had declared it must be so with mournful unanimity ; her mother had hinted it ; Aunt Emma herself on the terrible occasion had even drawn the portrait of that kind of person. Delia felt sure she was going to be crushed flat under a very Juggernaut of learning. But this young man did not seem in the least formidable. To be sure, he was not very prepossessing to look at ; indeed, the first glimpse Delia had had of him almost caused her to shiver at his ugliness ; but now that she had overcome this first impression he had lost something of this look of the grotesque. And when he talked he was quite nice.

She didn't know what to make of his face. Somehow it was an odd, queer kind of face ; and now and then she stole covert glances at it because it puzzled her considerably. And when those eyes that were like liquid fire opened at her and gave her that grave smile she had a sudden

sensation of being taken out of her depth altogether. He was no longer ugly when he smiled, but even then the latent sombreness was not dispelled. His face was worn and pale ; there were lines on the forehead ; and the prominence of the cheek-bones and the attenuation of the flesh gave a kind of mountain and valley effect to the upper part of his countenance in conjunction with the lower. His lean jaws curved in the shape of a hatchet ; his eyes were large and melancholy, of a brooding grey, set very deep, with a rather disconcerting but not unpleasant habit, as she had already discovered, of coming wide open at you suddenly. His forehead came forth boldly, an uncompromising dome, his brows were strongly marked, and when he was silent the curves of his lips sealed his mouth so close that it was hard to know how ever they were going to spring apart. His expression was hard to describe, yet it needed but a little to become austere and even slightly frightening. That was singular because his voice was so different. It was a low, gentle, beguiling voice, not in the least harsh or displeasing, as you would think it must be ; and it had already done something to reconcile her to her tragic fate that she could actually sit and listen to it without any feeling of antagonism.

“ Would you say, Miss Broke, that a book was worse than a poacher ? ”

“ There are books that I love,” said Delia, at first with hesitation, and then with a darting light in her blue eyes.

“ But not in the way you love hunting ? ”

“ Yes, the books I mean. I love them quite as much, or—or more, I think.”

“ I am so glad.”

“ Why are you glad, Mr. Porter ? ”

“ Well, you see, Miss Broke, if you had no love for books you would find my presence intolerable.”

“ Yes, I should.”

The young man could not repress a smile at the deliberate syllables of her candour. It was only a furtive one, but in an instant crimson flowed across her face.

“ I beg your pardon ; I have been horribly rude.”

"No, no, Miss Broke, pray forgive me for teasing you. Really, I think we are going to get on most tremendously well."

"You will be very patient with me, and I am going to try awfully hard not to be stupid." Delia's graciousness was born of his demeanour; he was not consciously the courtier, but his air was charmingly conciliatory.

"I am sure you could never be stupid."

"Please don't expect too much of me; I am dreadfully dull at learning things."

"Do you think we might begin by your telling me the names of your favourite books?"

Delia hesitated; and when her tutor looked at her in the particular way that she had already found disconcerting she coloured with embarrassment.

"A guilty secret," he said beguilingly.

"They are not at all what I ought to read, I know. They are poetry and novels, I am afraid."

"Why is the illicit so delectable! You owe allegiance to the reigning monarchs, I presume?"

"I have only one favourite among the writers of the present day," said Delia.

"Won't you tell me the name of the author?"

"George Meredith," said Delia, colouring again.

"Do you find him easy to understand?"

"I can understand all the best parts, I think."

"And you skip the others?"

"I am not in the habit of skipping."

"Miss Broke, I apologize; the suggestion was unworthy. But tell me, do you prefer his poetry or his novels?"

"There is poetry I love more than his; but I adore Nevil Beauchamp and Richard Feverel."

"Which of his heroines would you choose to be? Renée? Clara Middleton? If I were a woman I think I should want to be Clara, just as being a man I want to be her hero."

"If I could be a heroine out of a story, I think I would choose to be Diana Vernon."

"Yes, I dare say she was rather better to hounds, but I

doubt whether she could run like Clara. And Clara's wit was perhaps just a little more polished, don't you think? Not that this is a quality to count in a lady in a tale, or in real life for that matter. But somehow I can't bring myself to admit that any heroine is quite so delightful as Clara."

"But I am sure, Mr. Porter, that Diana had the grander character. She always reminds me of my sister Joan. She has a grand character."

"Anyhow, the great Sir Walter is another of your friends?"

"I am afraid I worship him."

"And the poets?"

"I think I love them all."

"By Jove, yes!" The young man suddenly threw out his hands with a kind of shout that quite startled Delia. She was unprepared for any such outbreak. "Yes, by Jove, it's right not to compare them!"

"You love them too," said Delia, with a sudden delicious thrill.

"Aye—yes." The eyes of liquid fire sprang open again. "Aye—yes, I love 'em—rather!"

"Oh, that's splendid!" Delia could not hold back her enthusiasm. "You see those rows of brown dusty old volumes on the shelves, those right at the top"—an excited hand was waved in their direction—"every one of those are dear, beautiful old poets."

"Is Dan Chaucer there?"

"Yes, *he's* there."

"And—no, no, we mustn't. Safer to go back to the prose men, I think." The young man's laugh was really the most wonderful thing Delia had ever heard. "Miss Broke, I hope you love poor dear old Don Quixote."

"Indeed, yes," said Miss Broke, with great simplicity. "I just worship Don Quixote. Do you know, Mr. Porter, he somehow always makes me think of my father."

"Your father did not appear to be mounted on Rosinante when I saw him this morning. There was rather a Bertrand du Guesclin look about him. But it is my duty to insist that you worship *Robinson Crusoe*."

“ Yes, indeed, and *Treasure Island* too, and the *Three Musketeers*.”

“ And *Pilgrim's Progress* and Sir Thomas Malory ? ”

“ Oh, yes, and Jane Austen and Charles Lamb.”

“ And of course, Miss Broke, the author of *Weeds in the Grass* ? ” said the young man demurely.

CHAPTER IX

STARTLING DEVELOPMENT OF THE HEROINE

TUTOR and pupil suddenly caught themselves smiling.
“Is it my duty to admire *her*?” said Delia gravely.

“Your critical judgment fits you to answer the question for yourself.”

Her sigh of relief was so deep that he turned his laugh upon the little lady.

“Splendid!” he said. “I recognize the spirit of no-compromise—the spirit that enabled those ancestors of yours to bleed for their opinions.”

“I suppose it is all very wrong and very wicked, but that is how I feel.”

Something flashed so vividly out of Delia’s eyes, that for the first time he felt their power. Rather wonderful eyes they were; not arresting perhaps to a cursory look, but once you had seen them you wanted to see them again. Blue was their colour: blue as ocean and sky; blue calling for a noble simile if you chanced to catch them in a moment of surprise, wherein to see beneath the veil that kept their mysteries. The flash had revealed her. Looking through it, with his penetrating eyes, he saw she was an exquisite little creature in her way. Although even as he came to this fact he felt that you had to see deep to know that.

“You love poetry. I know you do!”

“How do you know?”

“It is in your face and your voice when you speak about it. It is delicious to be able to talk of it just as one feels. That is, if I may; you will allow me, will you not?”

"I would rather talk of poetry to the people who understand it than do anything else in the world."

"The people who understand it!"

"Well, suppose you allow me to choose one of them."

Delia still felt just a little nervous. Somehow she feared him just a little, for all that his friendliness and enthusiasm were so disarming. And yet he was easier to talk to than any one she had ever known. With her father, her sisters, her Uncle Charles, all of whom were her boon companions, and of whom she was no more afraid than they were of her, she had never found herself talking so pleasantly, so copiously, with so little difficulty in expressing her thoughts, and with so many thoughts surging to be expressed. She was more afraid, in a different way, of this new strange friend of hers than she was of her mother or her Aunt Emma. He gave her, even when he tried to make it less, a far keener sense of her limitations than did they, although so often it had seemed to her that that was an effect they were always striving to create. But this man was different altogether; he had what she could only call "a something else." Behind those deep-seeing eyes, that seemed to go right into your heart, behind that gentle and beguiling speech, lurked a power that had a more subtle fascination than anything she had ever known.

"I know I shall bore you terribly," she said, "but you don't know how I long to talk to you. All my sisters despise books; and even my mother is not a lover of poetry."

"That is surprising!" The young man permitted himself an arch smile.

"She says a love of poetry is really a disease."

"In its relation to the scientific and the useful?"

"And yet, she is, oh, so dreadfully clever!"

"My prophetic soul! Suppose we say her idea of literature is something that will pass examinations, or put meat in the pot or coals on the fire? Well, Miss Broke, it happens that the terms of my mission render it necessary that I shall regard it in that light myself, at the rate of five shillings an hour."

"Yes, but as we know what it is really we shall only be

playing a game, shall we not? When we study philosophy we shall be able to make it seem like poetry."

"So we shall!"

"You are going to give me the keys to those wonderful things I cannot understand. You will unlock the doors of meaning, so that I may read words which are like wonderful music, so that I may read the poetry which haunts you all night and every night like the voices in the trees."

Delia bent forward eagerly with her hands locked round her knees, and as she did so the sudden tears sprang into her eyes.

"A spark of the sacred fire!"

"Please you will not laugh at me!"

"It would be a sacrilege. Is it not the stuff of which poetry is made? In the day of the common danger or the common wrong did it not emit the native woodnotes wild of which we tame twentieth-century people are the inheritors? Has your race ever had a poet, Miss Broke? I cannot recall one."

"There is a Lady Margaret Broke who composed a Book of Hours in the reign of Edward the Third. I do not think you would call it very fine poetry."

"May I ask if Miss Delia Broke has made the attempt to remove the stigma of poetical sterility from her family?"

"No—yes—that is, at least!"

He regarded the tokens of her too vivid embarrassment with a pretence of gravity. Even as she struggled against it she felt how impossible it was to keep her secret. She would not confess her guilt, but her silence made it plain.

"Since when have you been a poet?"

Never before had she made such a confession; and with that dread of criticism those of her kind are apt to feel, it had seemed impossible to tell her secret. But the murder was out now.

"Won't you let me see your poetry?"

"No—no, I cannot!" said Delia, a little wildly. "It—it is not meant to be seen."

"Are you quite, quite sure?"

"I am quite sure!"

"Reflect a little. Think out exactly how you feel about it. I know a little myself of the inmost feelings of authors."

"I am quite sure!"

"The inmost feelings of authors are woefully complex."

"Indeed, I am quite sure my wretched writings were never intended for you to read."

"Reflect a moment longer. The whole truth is worth a struggle."

"They would make you despise me dreadfully."

"In your heart you are not so sure."

"Oh, how can you know that!"

"I know it only too well. Nature is careful of the type, you see; we are all alike, we authors. We, you and I, Miss Delia Broke and Mr. Alfred Porter, write to be read as much as ever Virgil and Milton did."

Delia began to waver. After all, there was something rather uncompromising in those beguiling eyes.

"Suppose you fetch them for me to see?" In such a persuasiveness there was somehow no margin for refusal.

"Oh, I could not, indeed I could not!" cried poor Delia.

"A poet must not be afraid, you know. He is the sword-bearer of truth, he is the prophet of beauty. We poets must always have the courage of our nobility. *Noblesse oblige*, you know, Miss Broke—that's the greatest motto in the world, to my mind. We poets must be proud to endure the carpings of fools, and the censure of those whose wisdom is beyond our own."

"But I am not a poet; indeed, I do not pretend to be a poet," said Delia, taking fright at this austerity.

"Nothing can save you from the charge. You have committed your thoughts to paper in the choicest form at your command. I hope you do not wish a humble fellow of your craft to believe that you have not wrought the best that is in you."

“ I was very much in earnest when I wrote them. But I feel how poor they must be.”

“ Would you have kept them had you *really* felt that ? ”

“ Indeed, I do feel it ; I do indeed ! ”

“ You think like that towards them sometimes, but at other times you think quite differently about them. Let this be one of the ‘ other times,’ in which they stand out in all their radiance.”

Delia was beginning to know already her impotence before him. She had denied the existence of her writings when he had surprised the secret in her ; he had made her confess that they were composed for a public, had she only had the courage to commit them to it ; and now, in spite of all she could do, he was about to compel her to yield them to the light of day. It was as though a new force had caught her. There was not a loophole by which he allowed her to escape the consequences of her deeds. The thoughts she had ventured to put upon paper must pay a toll for her daring. His half-laughing insistence caused her to see a kind of justice in it, and presently, with many misgivings, she rose to do his will.

While Delia went to procure these first-fruits of her young imagination, her tutor turned his attention to the library shelves. There were few new books, but some delightful old ones. It was a collection that owed little to the present generation of its owners, but was rather an accretion of centuries. His eyes glowed at the sight. When Delia returned, bearing her treasures in her arms like babes before her, he had a sense of happiness in store. He saw the promise of many Arcadian hours.

Delia’s writings were calculated to exhibit the scope and calibre of her mind. They comprised poems, plays, essays, hymns, short stories, and fragments of several novels. They were rolled into some twenty little tubes of white paper, spotlessly clean, and tied with blue ribbon. They represented the activities of a prolific pen and a lively imagination since the age of twelve. With the critic’s aid they were laid reverently side by side upon the table before the fire, and were

arranged like the works of Shakespeare in the order of their birth.

“Please do not look at the early ones.” Delia spoke very earnestly.

She had striven in vain for a note of gaiety. The tumult within was very high. With a short little laugh and a rather high colour she selected the first roll to pass in judgment before her critic. Not improperly, it was a poem on a tragic theme. It was inspired by the death of Cutlass, a gallant hound, who, in the ardours of the chase, had been cut in pieces by the London express.

The critic glanced at it with an immobility that could not be read, rolled it up and replaced it without a word of comment. He then turned his attention to prose and the drama. These did not draw a word from him either. He then took up an essay; it was called “An Appreciation of Lord Tennyson.” This also he read in a silence as complete as that in which he had read the others.

Delia watched this impassiveness while she tried not to do so. She strove very hard to attain that stoicism which she was sure her sister Joan would have been able to command in these circumstances. But she felt ruefully that nature had not fashioned her on a principle so heroic. Her will was not strong enough; her self-command almost failed her. The silence of the critic was a relief in a sense, but also it was bitterly disappointing.

“Are they—are they quite hopeless?” she ventured to ask at last, faintly.

“Suppose we burn them?”

She recoiled, aghast. It was like a hit in the face. Such a course had never entered her mind. The criticism she dreaded she had been steeling her heart to bear; but total annihilation—! The twenty little rolls were dear and faithful friends who had nourished her lonely spirit secretly when all the world had been unkind.

“N—no, I could not burn them,” she said in a thin little voice.

Her tone caused the young man to look at her with some-

thing strange in his eyes. "It may seem a little cruel," he said, "but that is the only way for the artist."

"I—I do not think of myself as an artist at all."

"Oh, but you are," he said with an abrupt frankness that was like a boy's and yet in reality was something quite different. "It's all there, you know."

"But I am sure I would prefer not to be an artist and be allowed to keep my treasures, than be an artist and have them destroyed."

The critic enfolded her with his charming melancholy smile.

"You are not the one to fear the sword and the fire, Miss Broke," he said in a voice that thrilled her.

"I am a wretched coward," said Delia miserably. "Oh, I am sure I could never consent to have them burned. My mother found them once in their hiding-place and said she would burn them, and I passed a dreadful week. My sister Joan might be able to bear it if they were hers; yes, she would, for her courage is so great; but I—I am not brave enough."

"You are no coward, Miss Broke," said the young man, with his wonderful eyes sinking deep into hers. "And think what it means to be an artist. The laurels are a crown of thorns, but is not our guerdon worth all that we pay for it in blood and tears? Courage, Miss Broke, always courage."

His face was quite bewildering now.

"You almost frighten me," said Delia, quailing. "I—I—I feel so mean."

Again his eyes had that look of liquid fire.

Delia shivered.

"I am sure I could not, I am sure I could not," she cried, training a sidelong look upon her treasures. "Besides, Mr. Porter, was not Shakespeare an artist? yet he never blotted a line."

"I would he had blotted a thousand. The sword and the fire, always the sword and the fire."

"Oh, you frighten me!"

"Yes, but Art is a rather frightening matter for those

who enter her service. The artist must toil early and late with sinews of steel and an inflexible courage in his heart, if he is to be fit to bear the sword of Truth, the lamp of Beauty. There must be no vacillation on the part of those who wear the gage of the Mighty Mistress. The wounds are many and grievous, the toils unceasing, the pleasures vague, the rewards are mockery, but the humblest foot-soldier in the ranks has no thought for things like these. He suffers great penalties and renounces the world simply to say, 'This is Truth—this is myself. This is Beauty—this is my soul.'"

Delia regarded her tutor with grave bewilderment. He had spoken with the fervour of the prophet. There was passion in his voice and a kind of exaltation in his face. The strong was calling on the weak to gird itself. Her heart in its young chivalry leapt out to him, yet her fear of him, at first an instinct, was mounting to a pitch that made her tremble.

"You mean that we must be true to ourselves," she said.

"Yes, let us do the best that is in us. Let it be said that we wrought as good as we knew. It is all that we are here for."

"You make me feel how great your ideals are."

"And yours?"

"I do try to have my Ideal."

"Well, Miss Broke, put it into words if you can."

"I should like to have a strong and splendid character like my sister Joan."

"That's no bad one. Now I want you to take up the last of these things of yours and read it again. When you have done so I would like to ask you just a few questions about it."

Obediently, Delia took up her most recent performance, "A Ballad in Imitation of Master Francis Villon."

"Now," said the young man when she had read it, "do you think if you wrote it again you could make it better?"

"No, not myself personally. It seems much nearer what I meant than anything I have tried to do before. Of course,

a real poet would be ashamed of it, but I do not feel I could make it better myself."

"You are quite clear upon the point?"

"Yes, I think I am," said Delia nervously.

"Well, now," said the young man in his gentle voice, "that ballad tells me that you did not go to the real Villon, but to Dante Gabriel Rossetti. May I ask why?"

"I cannot read Villon as well as I can read Rossetti."

"Yes, the medieval French has to be grappled with. But now I ask you, do you think you could improve your ballad if you found the original to be as clear as the translation of Rossetti?"

Delia did not answer at first.

"Perhaps I could just a little in some ways," she confessed reluctantly.

"But the old French is very hard to get on with? Well, now, Miss Broke, may I ask what your sister Joan would do in such circumstances?"

"She would never have written it," said Delia quickly. "Her tastes are not at all in the direction of poetry."

"Ha! the eternal feminine," he said, laughing. "But please assume that you yourself are your sister Joan. Now tell me just what you would do in the circumstances, having regard to your conception of her character."

"Perhaps I might learn to read old French," said Delia, blushing vividly. She had seen all at once, with a tinge of shame, where the ambush lay.

"And afterwards, don't you think you might remodel your ballad by the light of your fuller knowledge? And don't you feel that possibly your imitation would be more faithful?"

Delia replied by placing her ballad in the fire.

"And now the others—if you are not afraid to apply the same standard."

For the moment she stood irresolute. The conflict soon passed. Now the first step was taken she was too thorough-going to be content with half-measures. One by one she began to commit her cherished manuscripts to the fire. To be sure, it was a Spartan act; but she held her mouth

tight, and kept the tears out of her eyes somehow, and tried to fix her mind firmly on her sister Joan. No consolation was bestowed upon her by the instigator of this inhuman hardihood. So little sympathy had he for the signal deed that he even ventured to superintend its execution. However, when he took the rolls in his hands with the object of consigning them personally to perdition, it was a straw too much.

"Put them down, please," she said fiercely. "I cannot have you destroy them; I cannot have anybody destroy them but myself. They are mine; I made them, and I will make an end of them. I must burn them myself, please."

Tears were very near. It is hard, even for your Spartan nature, to perform a deed of the first grade of heroism, and for it to leave public opinion cold.

"Pray do not think I underrate your courage. I am not sure I could have done it myself."

"You—you do not know how dear they are to me," said poor Delia.

He shook his head and smiled sombrely.

"I would not have asked you to destroy them had I not," he said.

"I do not know why I am destroying them; I am sure I did not mean to."

"Nay, do not look on them as dead. They are the seed that on a day shall raise the flower. Who can tell what shall spring from these balls of white fluff? One wonders how much Milton burnt when he was young. Now suppose you do not put pen to paper again for a whole year in the way of composition. You shall read what you choose in the meantime. You have no voice at present, it would be astonishing if you had; but give yourself up to those who have spoken greatly to the ages, and perhaps one day you may be of them. What thoughts they induce do not trouble to express, but let them lie fallow. And I think we bond-slaves of Truth—yes, since you have shown yourself capable of this high devotion to a principle, I hail you as a fellow-cadet of our service—I think we ought, in the first place, to crave that sovereign

humility which our Mistress imposes upon all before they are allowed to see her face.”

The young man concluded his exordium with a strange light shining in his eyes. But poor Delia continued her painful task, heeding not the prophet. By now the tears had gathered, and they remained in the most persistent and ridiculous fashion until all the little white rolls tied with blue ribbon had been committed tenderly, unrelentingly to the flames.

CHAPTER X

CET ANIMAL EST TRÈS MÉCHANT

DELIA was on her knees, pressing the last of the sacred packets between the bars, with tears still glistening in her eyes, at the moment Mrs. Broke chose to enter the library.

"Deep in the mysteries of epsilon and upsilon I do not doubt," said the fluent lady.

However, the attitude in which her daughter was discovered gave pause even to her indomitable readiness.

"Oh, mother!" cried Delia, "I am burning my manuscripts." Her voice was almost tragic.

"Do you mean those absurd things I once found in your room?"

Mrs. Broke gave the tutor a smile.

"A most remarkable morning's work," she said. "How you have contrived it, Mr. Porter, I don't know, but I am sure that I, personally, am very grateful. So they are really destroyed! And may one venture to hope the folly is forsworn?"

"For a time at least," said the young man.

"Excellent. I see your tact. She is to be cured by degrees. Really, Mr. Porter, I congratulate you upon such a beginning. I hope you will stay to luncheon."

The young man having consented, Mrs. Broke led the way to the dining-room. The repast was frugal; but the conversation of the hostess was really very agreeable. Delia, on the other hand, did not speak a word. The talk, or more properly the monologue, for at first the young man's share of it was extremely slight, hovered about the topic of

literature. He was entertained not a little by the readiness of this woman of the world. She was wonderfully "sound." Not only was she acquainted with all the landmarks, but her opinions coincided with accepted literary verdicts in the most honourable way.

"You are, of course, an admirer of Lady Bosket?"

"On the contrary, I cannot count myself as one of the elect."

"I beg your pardon."

The young man repeated his words without the faintest trepidation.

His amused coolness rather took the fluent lady aback. It was so unlooked-for. Yet, after all, such a frankness had its piquancy.

"Surely you admire her *Poses*?"

"I confess they amuse me a little."

"May I confess, on my own part, this is the first time I have heard them accused of being amusing?"

"I gather that you did not find them so."

The woman of the world recognized a certain deftness in the touch. Unfortunately it was only one world she belonged to—"the great world" which is apt sometimes to be just a little provincial. All the same, with so much intelligence she might have been wavier.

"But surely," she urged, "you are not insensible to the delicate tracery of her style, the depth of her culture, the width of her outlook?"

"Wholly," said the young man with an arch smile.

"Can it be a blind intolerance? You have reasons, I hope?"

"I hope I have not formed the fatal habit of making up my mind without them."

"How one longs for the privilege of hearing what they are."

"I fear they might seem technical."

"Caviare to the general, perhaps. Alas, Mr. Porter, that our sex should always be handicapped out of the game! I am a mere woman without pretensions to culture in any form, but if you are not afraid to pay me the most delicate

compliment in your power, you will give me the chance to forget my limitations. And, if I may say it, to neglect an opportunity of complimenting a woman on the score of her intellect is a little unkind. Flattery is very precious in our eyes."

The young man was alert enough to see that he was in imminent danger of crossing swords. But his was a nature that could not shirk a contest. Delia, on the other side of the table, trembled for him. She had a wholesome dread of her mother's powers, purchased by many a cutting stroke. Had she been able to save her friend from his danger she would have done so, but tied by her subordinate position she knew not how. Suddenly, however, her desire grew uncontrollable. She must save him at any cost. She bent across the table, full under the astonished eyes of her mother, and said, "Please, please do not argue the point! You and my mother do not—do not see things with the same eyes."

At once he understood the chivalrous solicitude that had nerved her to this audacity. While, however, he was smiling his gratitude to the little lady, her mother had turned her cold with a smile of her own.

"Please, Mr. Porter, do not humiliate me by withholding your criticism of Lady Bosket. It will be very unkind not to forgive limitations for which my unfortunate sex is to blame."

"Lady Bosket and her school," said the young man with an air of deprecation as became one striving to forget the maxim, "Language was given us to conceal our thoughts," "are trying to set up a rule of thumb, to which all writing is expected to conform. As in the day of Pope it was the heroic couplet of five feet, so in ours no less is demanded of a writer by Lady Bosket and her school than that he shall have the Conscience of a Nonconformist. The ideal Lady Bosket has before her is to be respectable in the Victorian sense. She has a mission; she is the guardian of public decency. 'You may write like an angel, but,' says she, 'beware of your moral tone.'"

"Surely that is a precept which can never lose its significance."

“ In art it has no significance. Art is non-moral.”

“ Surely art overflows with moral teaching ? ”

“ Only inasmuch that it is human endeavour in its highest and most disinterested form. But your true craftsman does not preoccupy himself with shaking his fist in the faces of the wicked ; neither does he preoccupy himself with his own integrity. He does not weave his visions and his meditations into patterns that dazzle us into a blindness of dogma. He has no desire to become a shibboleth of church or chapel or the parish council. He is neither better nor worse than ourselves ; he is one of us ; he is our brother. He holds the mirror up to nature for no conscious advancement of our immortal souls, except in so far as the reflection in it of truth and beauty may react upon them. He paints his Madonna or carves his Mercury, or writes his epic with fasting and with prayer, but if you are to look for the moral teaching in these works, do not seek it in the severity of their line, but in the austerity of the life of him who wrought them.”

“ I can say with the deepest conviction that the life of Lady Bosket will bear inspection. It is one of continued saintliness.”

“ One fears the loveliness of her private character is powerless to redeem the unseemliness of her works.”

“ I beg your pardon.”

“ The paradox is inevitable. Lady Bosket, in her rôle of self-elected guardian of the public morals, is an offence to the sanctity of the art she pretends to serve. Bad art is the only form of immorality known to æstheticism. Lady Bosket is our old friend Mrs. Grundy, in an *édition de luxe* carefully revised and brought up to date, with an appendix of the latest laws of literary decorum and deportment.”

“ You will admit, I hope, that there should be some standard of good form ? ”

“ I cannot admit an arbitrary one. It ought not to be compulsory, even in England, to drape the legs of one's piano. This Mrs. Grundy of ours, this national fetish, is as essentially vicious a person as there is to be found anywhere. Hers is the doctrine of clothes with a vengeance ; God,

nature, and art are so obscene in themselves that not for a moment must they be viewed without them. If she visits a picture gallery the sight of a marble upon which Michaelangelo has forgotten to place a pair of trousers quite spoils her day. One cannot help feeling how ironical it is that persons who do nothing but abuse it should exploit this sacred gift of vision."

Mrs. Broke had already begun to see that she was no match for her antagonist. He did not play the game as it was understood in the drawing-room. Evidently he was without experience in that style of combat.

The redoubtable lady was piqued. She was not used to defeat, at her own table particularly, the place of all others where she reigned supreme. Some people might have called it courage on the part of this young man to permit himself such a swashbuckling style, but her name for it was less complimentary. Poor Delia, who had followed the controversy with a painful solicitude for the welfare of her friend, now saw certain subtle evidences, unmistakable none the less to those skilled in the signs, of her mother's anger. The sudden appearance of a cold sparkle in those eyes made her tremble for the young man, as often enough it had made her tremble for her unfortunate sisters and her unfortunate self.

"You astonish one," said Mrs. Broke, lifting her mild voice a little. "Your criticism is terribly scathing, but at least it has the rare merit of candour. Poor Lady Bosket!"

"I did not give my opinion willingly. Please remember I was urged. I'm afraid I'm rather reckless if I happen to feel strongly."

"You are very fearless, certainly."

"Stupidly so, sometimes. I always avoid an argument if I can, because I can't help saying more than I ought."

In any one else such a frankness would have pleased her; it was so simple, so naïve. But this animal was very bad, and she was a woman playing for victory. Already in her bones she hated this underbred young upstart, and she meant to punish him.

"I agree, Mr. Porter, that your outspokenness may not

be without its inconvenient side," she said, hoisting herself smoothly on the amende he had offered. "May it not at times become a little embarrassing to poor Lady Bosket?"

"She has not suffered at present under my unfortunate controversial method, I am happy to say."

"After all, that is not unnatural. But I would ask, does it strike you as quite politic that one should hold these views of Lady Bosket and her work?"

"Politic?"

There was a sudden grim sparkle in the eyes of Mrs. Broke when she saw the quick lift of the young man's head.

"Would it not be a little wounding to Lady Bosket, if it came to her ears that one in whom she happens to take a great interest held such heretical opinions concerning her?"

"Forgive me if I venture to ask whether the word 'politic' does not call for a stronger qualification."

"Is it wise to insist upon a stronger one?"

"I gladly take the risk."

To Delia's dismay that cold light was ever growing in her mother's eyes.

"Have you not in a sense been 'taken up' by her?"

"Forgive me if I crave a little more explicitness."

"Is she not in a sense your patron? I mean, of course, in the way that in happier days persons of a pre-eminently fortunate condition stood in that relation to art and to those who practise it."

The young man laughed imperturbably. The time-honoured method of hitting below the belt did not hurt him at all. He saw that the redoubtable lady had completely lost her temper.

"I confess I had not thought of it," he said cheerfully. "And I think there is humour in the idea."

He laughed whole-heartedly.

Mrs. Broke had no particular reason to be solicitous for the reputation of her sister-in-law, but superb as was the control she knew how to keep upon herself, for the moment it was gone. She was genuinely angry. Her red face had grown a shade redder; the expanse of her smile had grown

a fraction more expansive ; and the grim light the frightened Delia had observed in her eyes was now burning more coldly and oddly than ever.

“ I gather, Mr. Porter, that you do not find the idea wholly devoid of amusement ? ” she said, following up in her mellowest accents. “ Still, I must admit that I have heard of quite a number of even literary persons who are not ashamed of Lady Boskēt’s friendship.”

“ Please forgive me,” said the young man with his whole-hearted laugh. “ The idea is so new to me. It had never occurred to me that our few and very formal relations were in danger of being construed in the light of patronage.”

“ You appear to repudiate them.”

“ Not at all. I am merely anxious that an exaggerated idea of my importance should not get abroad.”

The simplicity of his way of saying this completely baffled his fair antagonist. The demure assumption of his mildness was in no wise behind her own. And she was quite clever enough to know that his was vastly the more delicate. She was hitting below the belt, which she knew ; but it seemed she was not to have it all her own way. Where a warrior of the other sex would have admired his skill in the face of a peculiar disadvantage, his fair antagonist deplored the fact that he should defend himself at all.

“ Your amusement is so unconquerable,” she said, “ that you force me to find a reason for it. But please let me say that in the first instance I was not conscious of having provided it.”

“ Nor, if I may say so, do I think you are now. It may not seem obvious to everybody, but to me, I confess, it is strikingly so. It is good, of course, to enjoy the status which the legend ‘ Appointment by Royal Warrant ’ confers upon the royal grocer. It is a novel feeling, but doubtless a happy one when one becomes accustomed to the glamour.”

Yet again the young man’s laugh was heard, and now its note was so robust that it told the sharp-witted lady that she had made rather a fool of herself. Not that she could ever have admitted it. But somehow she did not feel she had shone. She hastened, therefore, with the great mobility

for which the woman of the world is famous, to scramble back to the safer ground of the influence of Beowulf on the early Augustine Fathers.

She could not rid herself of a dim feeling that for once, with all her social experience, she had been led into error. The tact upon which she was apt to plume herself had been at fault. She was not sure of the direction in which the error lay, or exactly how it had come to be made, but the uneasy feeling remained to her that things had not gone very well at luncheon. Still, the solace was hers that in those uncomfortable moments when one rubs shoulders with Democracy, these little clashes are, after all, the lustres in the martyr's crown. Yes, there could be no doubt this was a very rough diamond. Still, he was what he was—the son of a Cuttisham tradesman. It was not fair to expect too much. She hoped piously, all the same, that poor dear Edmund would not stumble across him. If he did the poor dear fellow would have a fit!

When the young man had taken his leave, the ruffled lady spent some time in meditating upon her course. Should she write and tell Emma, or should she not, of the kind of person her choice had proved to be? Had she consulted her private feelings she would have sat down there and then and have given him his *congée*. But after all there was Emma to be considered. Emma held an eminent position in the category of those whom we designate as “touchy.” There was no saying how she might take it. After the encomiums she had lavished on the man she might make it a personal matter if this particular gift-horse were looked in the mouth. And they could by no means afford to quarrel with Emma. Apart from personal pique, which she was too clever a woman not to be able to swallow, it really didn't matter who instructed Delia in Latin and mathematics. It would have been more agreeable for the child, certainly, could she have had a gentleman to direct her studies, but after all he was not going to form her manners. Besides, it would do her no harm to endure a little hardship; would it not be in keeping with the Spartan tradition in which all her girls had been brought up? And again, as Emma had

said, with surprising penetration for her, "With a man of that kind there can be no danger!"

The redoubtable lady having entered into the matter, not without a certain zest that a knotty question will excite in an energetic intelligence, presently sought the help of Delia, who was in a position to throw further light on the young man's *bêtises*.

"I am afraid, child, you found your tutor rather a trial. Still, it is hardly wise to increase your prejudice against him. For your Aunt Emma's sake you must have patience; although I have a great mind to let her **know** how he speaks of her books, and how he regards her kindnesses towards him."

"What kindnesses, mother?" Delia's curiosity enabled her to ask.

"I am surprised, child, that you should ask the question. It is wholly through your Aunt Emma's interest that he is allowed to come here at all."

There was something in the voice that made Delia shiver. She seemed to grow numb and a little faint; the blood ran out of her face suddenly.

"I don't think he looks at it in that light at all, mother," she found the courage to say. As she spoke the blood ran as suddenly back into her face, and seemed to burn with a heat intenser for its banishment.

"One is afraid he does not. It is what one complains of in him."

For the life of her, Delia could not see what it was that her mother complained of in her friend. She was aware, in a vague way, that she was very inexperienced, but look at the matter as she might she could not tell in what he had offended. Was it his frank criticism of the writings of Aunt Emma? It could hardly have been that, because her mother had insisted that he should make it; and he had spoken with a conviction that was very honest. No, she was sure that there must be some deeper-seated reason.

Before to-day Delia had only been brought into intimate relation with three men in all her young life; and they were her father, her brother, and her Uncle Charles. She had been

able to recognize certain fine attributes in each of these heroes, but the hours she had passed in the library with her tutor that morning had far more powerfully affected her with the significance of the masculine character.

Now that they were no longer face to face, and she was able to view him with detachment, an extraordinary power seemed to have been his. Without any appearance of effort, without in any way insisting on his great reserve force, his will had dominated hers completely. He had wrung her secrets out of her, and he had made her obey his wishes, when nothing was firmer in her than the determination not to do so. The episode of the destruction of her manuscripts continued to bewilder, to disconcert her.

In many respects poor Delia was little more than a child. The accents of the nursery were as yet hardly out of her voice. But the old eternal mysteries lurked below that shy personality. Nebulous and fragile at present, tenderly vague and so indefinite that only one pair of eyes had the cunning to suspect its existence, it was yet no light and vapid spirit that brooded in those deep-set eyes with their strange filmy curtain. A soul was there to surrender; a nature to wrench; a heart to be made to bleed. Nothing could have been more inimical to her development as a member of the community in which she made a unit than that at a season so susceptible she should be thrown into the toils of a nature so powerful that it might crush her to the dust without being conscious that it touched her.

Late in the afternoon the Miss Brokes returned from hunting to find Delia curled up in the recesses of the cosiest chair of their common room. A cheerful fire was before her, and she was reading the mustiest old book imaginable: the Works of Jeremy Taylor, D.D., Volume IV.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE TEMPLE OF DIANA

IT was their custom on their return from the field to come there in their muddy attire, and revive the events of the glorious day, while they refreshed their weariness with weak tea and bread and butter cut in very thick slices. This afternoon they were in a fine state of exaltation. Their day had been so entirely delightful, that after some little argument, whereby they hoped their daring would grow less, they resolved to commemorate the occasion by asking for jam for tea.

The resolve itself was easy, but its execution involved a peculiar hardihood. Had it been possible to make the request directly to the cook or the housekeeper it would not have been at all a difficult matter. But it was outside the jurisdiction of those functionaries. Demands of that kind had to be made to their mother! She it was who regulated the bill of fare on a basis of rigid economy. And these intrepid sportswomen had such a wholesome awe of her that in the absence of volunteers for the heroic duty they were fain to resort to conscription by ballot. They wrote their names on six tiny pieces of paper, rolled them up, and shook them together in an old boot. Joan then solemnly drew out one.

It bore the name of Delia. They were almost certain beforehand that that was the name it would bear, since it had become a proverb among them that Delia was very unlucky. For one thing she had been born on a Friday. Everything disagreeable seemed to befall her as if by fell design. It almost seemed sometimes that a malevolent fairy

had presided at her birth. All the same she was promptly haled out of her comfortable chair and bidden to resign the Works of Jeremy Taylor, D.D., Volume IV, to enter on her diplomatic mission. Moreover she was instructed to remind their mother that it was precisely two months and three days—the date was marked on the calendar in sedulous red ink—since their last pot of jam had been allotted, and although it had been only a small pot they had made it last nearly a week.

Delia, however, was very soon back again. Her interview with the powers had been brief and to the point.

“Mother says certainly not.”

Accepting the decree with a cheerful readiness that went to show that it had been anticipated, their onslaught upon the thick slices of bread and butter was not lacking in resolution. They had had a splendid day: had found four times, had killed three foxes and the other had gone to ground in the Hollow. They had run from Bobbet's Gorse to the Twelve Apostles in twenty-two and a half minutes, and Uncle Charles had said he would defy the Quorn to do it in less. They had been in sight of hounds most of the time; all except Margaret, who was obliged to be careful of The Doctor's off fore-leg. In consequence she had not dared to put him at that bullfinch at the bottom of Coplaw Hill, the particularly beastly one with the very bad take-off, and had had to go round by the gate. But everybody else had brought it off all right, although Jane, as usual, had picked the wrong place—Jane blushing vividly—and if Pat had not been so clever, she must have had him down. Uncle Charles said that, take it altogether, it was one of the best days he had had since he had hunted the pack; and he had promised Joan, Philippa, and Harriet a brush apiece, although Hat might easily have spoilt everything when she nearly let Whitenose put his foot on Madrigal.”

“I am sure I did not,” said the indignant Harriet.

“Oh, Hat!” cried the other four. “Why, Uncle Charles looked at you himself and said, ‘Woa there, back pedál!’”

“Oh, you mean then,” said Harriet, with an air of relief that was very great. “That was only because I was going

out of my turn through the gate. I only squeezed in in front of that red-headed young farmer on that skew-bald thing that Uncle Charles said had come out of the Ark."

This explanation being deemed satisfactory to the Court, the narrative of events resumed its harmonious flow. Their father, although riding Porlock up to fifteen stone, had led the whole field at Mounsey's Brook, and had covered himself with honour by making a successful cast when hounds were at fault in the Spinney, Uncle Charles and "George" being left behind temporarily in the Maze. Lord Croxton had taken a tremendous toss when his young mare, the most beautiful chestnut they had ever seen, with perfect thoroughbred shoulders, had refused a post and rails in the last field but one on the left going into Caisby from High Moreton. Uncle Charles said it would have served the beggar right if he had broken his neck, because he ought to have known better than to put her at them when she was done, although Uncle Charles said you could not expect to find old heads on young shoulders all the same.

"It was his second horse too, so you will see the sort of day it has been," said Margaret.

"It was the last field but two coming into Caisby," interposed Philippa doggedly at this point. She had an air of weight that showed she spoke upon mature consideration.

"One," sang the other four.

"Two," said Philippa, more doggedly than ever. "It is the one with the cow hovel in the right-hand corner, and the row of pollard elms at the top end just as you come in."

"Flipper's right," said Joan. "What a stupid mistake! Of course, it is the second: the one that had the half-bred two-year-old in it, that Uncle Charles said was only fit for cat's-meat."

"So it was," chimed in the rest. "How stupid we are! And isn't it odd that Flipper is always absolutely correct?"

The edge being worn at last off their own exploits, they were able to extend a little commiseration to Delia. They gave liberally of their sympathy.

"Poor old Del!" they said. "What a shame to be left out of it like this! You *have* missed a glorious day, and all

because it is a fad of Aunt Emma's to send a perfectly *awful* young man to teach you Latin and Greek."

Delia blushed deeply at this reference, but they were too preoccupied with bread and butter to notice it.

"He is not perfectly awful," said Delia.

"Oh, Del," they said, "how can you! We rather admire you, of course, for making the best of your bad luck. It is right to make light of a thing when you cannot help it. But he is awful, you know he is."

"I don't," said Delia, "and I am sure you don't either."

"That is just what we do know," they sang in chorus. "We've *seen* him."

"He is not awful," said Delia.

"Yes, he is, Del, you know he is! It is brickish of you and all that to stick up for him, but we don't expect you to do it with us."

"He doesn't want any sticking up for."

"No, we shouldn't say he does. He is the sort of man who would be quite able to stick up for himself."

"No, he wouldn't," said Delia, with a fierceness they had never suspected in her. "He is very modest and very kind and he is awfully clever."

"What does cleverness matter, if he is what Billy calls a 'bounder'?"

"He is a gentleman," said Delia.

"Why doesn't he brush his hat, then?" said Philippa.

"Why does he wear such a silly collar?" said Jane.

"Why does he wear such a wretched old slovenly tie?" said Harriet.

"Why are his clothes so old and his boots so ugly?" said Margaret.

"Why is he the son of a Cuttisham tradesman?" said Joan.

"Yes, why is he the son of a Cuttisham tradesman?" demanded one and all in breathless chorus.

Delia summoned every spark of her courage.

"Why should he not be?" she said, fighting against the faintness that was stealing along her veins. "It is not a wicked thing to be the son of a Cuttisham tradesman as far

as I can see. I do not see how it is possible to despise a man like that. I am sure that those who do so are themselves despicable."

"Delia!" they cried aghast.

"I don't care. You drove me to it."

"Delia!" they shouted. "What would mother say if she heard you talk in this way? What would father say?"

"I don't care," said Delia. "It is the way I feel. Mother was rude to him at luncheon; and when he had gone she spoke of him cruelly."

"Delia," they shouted, "what *are* you saying?"

"You are just the same," Delia went on in a dreary voice; and just then in a vague fashion her manner recalled that of their Uncle Charles when he had a glass of whisky in his hand. "You are very cruel. How did Aunt Emma speak of him the other day? Now that I know the kind of man he is I can see how horrid it was of her to talk of him like that."

"And now that we have seen the kind of man he is," said Joan in the voice of their father, "we can see that for once justice was on Aunt Emma's side."

"I shall hate you, Joan, if you talk of him like that," said Delia wildly; she was losing the hold she had kept on herself all through. "I shall hate everybody. It is cruel, it is unjust!"

She got up, cast down her book, threw herself upon the sofa, buried her head in its dilapidated cushions, and burst into a flood of tears. Her sisters were amazed. None of them was given to displays of that kind. They formed no part of their Spartan tenets. And the cause was as inexplicable as such a behaviour was unprecedented. There was not a word in all they had said they did not mean, which was not perfectly true. They could not possibly have offended Delia. True, she might choose to consider they had done so. On thinking it over they could only conclude that she suffered from a sense of injury, which it was impossible to wreak on the person who was responsible for it; but now, having found a pretext in an imaginary grievance, she was able vicariously to visit her wrongs on them.

This was the only view of her unheard-of conduct to which

they could subscribe. They were sincerely sorry for her. Truly, it was hard, poor little kid! that she should be condemned to spend her mornings in that miserable way when she would so dearly love to be out hunting like themselves with their father and their Uncle Charles. But, after all, things were not so black as they seemed. They had their mother's word for it that this horrid man was only coming three times a week. Might it not be arranged that he should come on those days when hounds did not meet? They gave their sorely distressed youngest sister the comfort of this suggestion.

"It might even be arranged that one of the days should be Sunday," said Philippa, the weighty and the practical.

Strangely enough, however, their attempts at consolation did not lessen Delia's passionate grief. Never had they seen any one weep so bitterly. From the manner of her distress they might have inflicted a real injury upon her, instead of one whose sole existence was in her own imagination. But they were simple creatures, who were soon moved to remorse. After all, they should have been more careful. Some of the things they had said of her tutor had perhaps been intended to tease her a little; and they ought to have refrained from chaff of any sort at a time when the poor child was only too likely to be overborne by her troubles.

Joan, the eldest, the spokeswoman on every public occasion for them all, begged her pardon gravely. Had they only known, they would certainly not have breathed a word against her tutor in badinage or otherwise. Nor for a moment had they thought it likely that she would resent it. Joan was good enough to add that she thought it rather chivalrous of her to stick up for him like that, notwithstanding what her real feelings must be; that it was plucky of her, and that she was a brick. Such a fine amende from Joan, who was ever foremost in snubbing her—she was the author of the famous conundrum: "Why is Delia like a chair?—Because it is her nature to be sat upon"—they felt was a lordly compensation for her fancied wrongs.

Nothing they could say or do, however, had the power to console her. She kept her face buried in the sofa cushions.

The distress they had innocently provoked distressed them too. But they could find no remedy for it. They said nice things to her, they said nice things about her, and blamed themselves in vain. More and more were they puzzled, for they could gain no clue to this extraordinary exhibition of her grief. And when at last reluctantly they left her still surrendered to tears, and went to dress for dinner, their minds were exercised dreadfully. And well they might be, since Delia was at as great a loss to account for her behaviour as were her sisters themselves.

CHAPTER XII

MAUD WAYLING

AT dinner that evening their mother made an announcement. Maud Wayling was coming to stay with them while Billy was home on leave. She was expected to arrive the next morning, and Billy was to come from Windsor in the evening.

The meal was more cheerful than had lately been the case. Everybody seemed happy with the exception of Delia. She, it was true, was looking miserable, and her eyes were red; but at no time could she be said to count at the dinner-table. Indeed, this evening her unhappiness was hardly noticed, because their father was so gay. This evening the load of care that had come upon him lately was no longer there. They had his jovial laugh in their ears—to his girls there was no music like it; he took a new interest in the things around him, he discussed the doings of the day, and twice he made a joke. Their mother, too, was in wonderfully good heart. To be sure, she was invariably, but to-night it seemed as if her lightness of spirit was not a mere effort of the will. Even she, the most self-contained of people, seemed a little flushed by the coming of Maud Wayling.

The girls themselves were inclined to be a little excited by it. In a vague way they had come to understand that Miss Wayling was a sort of fairy godmother at the touch of whose magic wand the fortunes of their house might be re-established. It was settled that Billy was to be married very soon; and somehow it was expected that the marriage would add to the happiness of their father and mother, and by that means increase their own. All the same, at

present they were inclined to be a little in awe of Miss Wayling.

She was older than they were, and although they had compared notes upon their dolls when they were quite small, Joan was the only one who had seen her since she came out. That was at a dance in London during the season in which Joan herself came out. There, beholding Miss Wayling from afar, she appeared to be an altogether dazzling person, and Joan thought her dress was exquisite. She had a great success, but it was a curious thing that Billy didn't dance with her once. Joan had remembered this because she had an excellent memory.

Still, it was idle to deny that the six critical ladies had already formed a slight prejudice against Miss Wayling. No matter how pleased their father and mother might be at the prospect of her arrival, no matter what glowing accounts were given of her niceness, they were not sure that they were going to like her just at first. Try as they might—and to do them justice they tried very hard indeed—they found it impossible to rid their minds of the feeling that she was in a sense an interloper who was coming to steal their idol. Then, again, Billy's fiancée had the cordial approval of Aunt Emma, a fact in itself sufficient to condemn an angel from heaven.

The next morning, about twelve o'clock, William the coachman—dear old William whose face was like the full moon!—brought the ramshackle old omnibus up to the front door in his most stately manner. He had on his best livery, carefully preserved through many summers and winters, with the silver buttons on it shining in the February sun like veritable Koh-i-noors. The cockade in his absurd old hat was very upright and full of consequence. George the footman, who shared the box-seat, was a worthy companion. Their airs, of which, to be sure, they appeared unconscious, had long been the envy of other household retainers up and down the county. If anything could have embellished the crazy vehicle of which William and George had the charge, surely their demeanour would have done so. Weak the flesh of this family, but the spirit was still vigorous. Ancient,

gout-ridden George displayed surprising agility in descending from the box-seat to the door of the omnibus.

The Miss Brokes from the window of their common-room, which by a rare stroke of luck overlooked the hall door, witnessed George's descent. Six slender bodies were wedged discreetly behind the curtains, like so many puppies peeping out of the door of a kennel. Too excited to speak, they gazed intensely. There were six pairs of eager feminine eyes for everything. Piles of luggage were on the roof of the omnibus; great dress-baskets, and most alluring leather cases of every conceivable shape and size. Such a display of personal belongings struck the first note of awe. The vehicle had two occupants. The one that first emerged was not specially distinguished in appearance; in fact, for a moment they had quite a pang of disappointment. Of course—how stupid!—it was her maid. Such a princess of a creature could not possibly come without her maid.

The next moment they obtained a glimpse of some very remarkable feathers stuck in a very remarkable hat. Then they saw a long dark blue travelling-cloak that was lined with very expensive-looking fur. They could divine nothing of its inhabitant except that she was uncommonly tall and somewhat pale. She carried her head in the air, loftily, they thought, quite as you would expect a princess to carry it. Her way of walking was rather splendid.

It thrilled them to see their mother, least demonstrative of women, come down the steps to greet the august visitor, and kiss her affectionately on both cheeks.

In the hall there seemed to be a commotion of welcome. Their mother's clear tones rose higher and higher. And through the open door of their room came the deeper tones of their father. Within a minute he was there to summon them.

"Come along, girls," he said. "No hanging back. Come and give a welcome to Miss Wayling."

He ushered the six of them into the hall proudly and gravely. Whenever he presented them to a stranger he could never dissemble the pride he had in them. It was always so unmistakable in his manner that people were apt

to be amused by it. If they had been six of the greatest beauties it could not have been more apparent.

Joan was first presented to Miss Wayling, and then Philippa, and then the others in the order of their entrance into the world. Precedence was a point on which they were very nice. It would have been unpardonable had one of them come forward out of the turn ordained by the date of her birth. Miss Wayling and the six ladies of the house of Broke shook hands gravely. Billy's sisters felt at once that they had never seen anyone quite so beautiful as Miss Wayling, and in the same instant they had all become a little afraid of her.

There is an air of mystery about great beauty, as though its possessor inhales a rarefied ether, and dwells on a plane remote from the common earth. As soon as Miss Wayling had turned her wonderful grey eyes on her new friends with a steady penetration of gaze which in another might have meant no more than a certain sincerity of contemplation, somehow they felt themselves to be drawing back.

When presently they sat at luncheon and Miss Wayling had removed her travelling-cloak, they recognized with the perfect honesty of their natures that her loveliness was even greater than at first they had felt it was. She was formed as nobly as a goddess, in long and wonderful lines, her skin was like marble, her eyes like lakes brooding in the heart of a dark forest haunted with mystery.

Miss Wayling was rather reserved, they thought. Their mother started many topics of conversation with her usual tact, but beyond the statement that it had turned out quite a nice day after all, although it was raining when she left London, and that she was glad Billy was to arrive that evening in time for dinner, she said hardly anything. No subject seemed to interest her particularly, and such was their sensitiveness that they almost feared she might be a little bored already. It almost came as a relief when she went to the drawing-room with their mother.

Joan only had ventured to speak a word to this regal creature, and that only because good manners seemed to call for it. Never before had they been so self-conscious ; at

all costs they felt they must guard against the risk of a snub. But that exquisite personality would have made anyone sensitive. They felt that if in any way, however slight, she were not to respond to them, they would be humiliated.

In their den that afternoon Delia astonished her five sisters immensely by bursting forth into a rhapsody on the subject of Miss Wayling's looks.

"She is like a beautiful picture," said their youngest sister in a hushed voice. "I have often wondered why great poets worshipped beautiful women, but I think I know now. She is just like some beautiful picture that has grown alive. Oh, how beautiful, how very beautiful she is! I suppose she must be very unhappy."

They were rather astonished at Delia's extravagance. Yet, allowing for her proverbial silliness, they believed they knew what she meant. It was surprising that one so beautiful and so rich, with lovely clothes and jewels and a maid of her own, was not more gay. You would have thought that such a favourite of fortune would be extremely happy, yet that was far from being the impression that she gave.

A little later in the afternoon Aunt Emma called. She was accompanied by Uncle Charles. It was not usual for them to arrive together, but their interest in the momentous event was very real; indeed, nothing could have been more eloquent of its great importance. Uncle Charles only went to other places when duty called him, but he came over nearly every day from Hipsley when he was at home, to pass the time of day with their father and mother and to see his nieces. He said they were such plain, sensible people, that they suited him, although, to be sure, he said their father's whisky was a disgrace to the neighbourhood. Uncle Charles took a real interest in them all, and came willingly "to see the filly."

Aunt Emma was in high feather. She was extraordinarily kind and gracious to Miss Wayling, and it was wonderful how kind and gracious she could be when she chose. She talked with her voice at its most agreeable pitch about travel and politics and London Society; did dear Maud know that Mr. Blank was certain to be prime minister? was it really

true about the X's? how sad it was about the Y's; and did she know the Z's?—all with an animation that they had never observed before in that paragon of austerity. She was even kind enough to say that as soon as Covenden bored dear Maud, a contingency that was bound to happen almost at once, she must come over to Hipsley and spend a few days with her.

“I pity you, my dear,” said the kind lady. “I always say my nieces are the six dullest girls in England. Why is horseflesh so demoralizing to women? The hopeless creatures!”—Aunt Emma's laugh had taken its cutting edge—“they cannot talk about anything except stables and kennels and bran-mashes, and they cannot do anything except sit in a saddle and walk puppies. But Billy is coming this evening, isn't he? so perhaps you will be able to survive for a week at any rate.”

Billy was expected to arrive at Cuttisham by the seven o'clock train. About six o'clock a telegram came to say that he could not come that night as he was unavoidably detained. Miss Wayling flushed ever so slightly. She asked to be allowed to read the telegram.

“I see it was handed in in Piccadilly,” she said in her very quiet and level voice. “He is not detained at Windsor, then.”

The flush deepened ever so little. At least Billy's sisters thought so.

Dinner was a very dull affair. A reaction from his late good spirits seemed to have come upon their father, and even their mother had not her former gaiety. Miss Wayling spoke hardly a word. It was a relief to the girls when the rather miserable function was at an end. They had looked forward to that evening with feelings so different. They could have wept for disappointment; for once even their appetites seemed to feel it, and Philippa alone took a second helping of their favourite cabinet pudding. And more than ever were they made uncomfortable by the presence of Miss Wayling.

The next morning there was a meet of the hounds. Courtesy required that they should ask Miss Wayling if she

hunted, and as she had brought no horses of her own they must be prepared to mount her from their own scanty stable. Fervently they hoped she did not hunt, not for any sordid reason, but they shirked the great responsibility of piloting her across a strange country and generally looking after her. They were much relieved when she said she did not care for hunting or any kind of sport.

Billy did not come that day, nor the day after, nor yet for many days. His absence was inexplicable. His mother wrote him twice; once to his quarters at Windsor, and once to his club in London. She did not receive an answer to either of her letters. It was the strangest thing! A fortnight had passed since his leave had begun; he knew that his fiancée was staying at Covenden, and he had certainly made his mother a promise that he would pay one of his rather infrequent visits to his home while she was there.

His absence was a mystery.

Miss Wayling said nothing, but to the relentless feminine observers by whom she was surrounded it was clear that she felt it in her impéccipient way. Her silence was rather painful, and the flush they had managed to surprise once or twice in her face seemed to burn deeper every time it came.

In the meantime the world had been let into the secret. A paragraph had appeared in the *Morning Post*, and had been copied in the *Cuttisham Advertiser* and the *Parkshire Times and Echo*, to the effect that a marriage had been arranged and would shortly take place between Mr. W. E. Broke of the Royal Horse Guards and Maud, daughter of the late Charles Wayling, of Calow, co. Salop.

Billy's absence began to be a subject of comment. Lady Bosket had remarked upon it to her friends and neighbours; they, in turn, remarked upon it to theirs. Lord Bosket commented on it freely. So open was his nature that it did not occur to him that his frankness could do harm. He felt that the case of Miss Wayling and his nephew had its counterpart in the tragedy whose moral he was never weary of pointing out of his own experience.

"I tell you what it is, my boy," he would say to each of his cronies in turn, "the colt can't be got to the post. And

not such a bad judge neither. Knows a thing or two, what? Education's spread a bit since our time. These young fellers can teach their grandmothers to suck eggs these days, bless you. These young 'uns are so fly nowadays, they won't even put their monickers to a money-lender's bill without they've got their lawyers with 'em, bless you. But small blame to the lad, say I. Wish I'd had half the beggar's sense."

Still, the matter was becoming awkward. Miss Wayling was still very reticent even to Mrs. Broke, but the Miss Brokes were sure she felt it keenly, although their sense of justice compelled them to admit that she bore it with great dignity. They were very sorry for her privately; although she could not be said, in spite of the fact that she had been with them a fortnight, to be yet admitted to their friendship. Still, they could see that in her aloof way she thought a lot of Billy. So much at least had to be allowed her. And such was their instinct for justice that they were even inclined to admit that had such a contingency been possible, this was an occasion when their hero was hardly doing himself credit. Those were sore days for their mother, but they were obliged to admire her will. Nobody was able to peer behind that indomitable smiling, almost gay exterior. Their father, poor man, had no such arts for his protection. He was wounded and angry; and those who wished to learn to what extent had only to look into his face.

At last, when Billy had made them all so uncomfortable that his father had vowed it should be no longer endured, and had even affirmed his intention of running up to London to rout the fellow out of his club—his father was certain that he was to be found there playing bridge—he had the grace to write a few lines to his mother. It was to tell her that he would arrive at Covenden on the evening of the next day. He would come by the seven o'clock train, the one he had been prevented coming by before; but he was sorry that he would not be able to stay longer than the evening following, having by now made such a hole in his leave that it did not extend beyond that limited period.

His father fumed when this letter was shown to him

and vowed he would have it out with Master William. Such behaviour was monstrous, and would no more have been tolerated by parents in his day, than a son—an eldest son particularly—would have been guilty of it. Then it was, in the face of this wholly unusual outburst of their father's, that Maud Wayling rose several points in the estimation of her critics.

"It may not be his fault," she said. "I feel sure there is a good reason for his absence."

"Why didn't he write before, then?" said their father unmollified.

"I feel sure there is some excellent reason," quietly persisted Maud Wayling.

"I agree with you, my dear Maud," said their mother. "I am sure you are right; and Edmund, I hope you will not mention the subject to him until he has taken the opportunity of giving me an explanation privately."

As usual, their father deferred to the wisdom of their mother. It was his invariable habit in all matters of this kind.

Billy's sisters somehow felt that this was "rather brickish" of Maud Wayling. It was nice of her to stick up for him fearlessly and publicly, when it would have been quite natural to resent the affront that had been offered her. So sensitive were they to "bad form" that they could not shirk the terribly painful fact that their hero hardly deserved to be stuck up for. At any rate Maud Wayling's attitude did her great credit. If at a time when she must be sorely wounded by Billy's behaviour she could stick up for him like that, they were bound in honour to consider her "a bit of a sportsman in her way."

At last the day came upon which the young prince was to arrive. Dinner was half an hour later than usual. The girls had never seen any creature so beautiful as Maud Wayling as she sat in the drawing-room perfunctorily turning over the pages of an album, while their mother knitted a waistcoat for their father, and while they, one and all, awaited the young man's arrival in a state of tension that was almost painful. This evening there was a kind of flush

in Miss Wayling's cheeks, which made her look absolutely lovely. Her gown was perfectly simple; yet it was the simplicity which came from Paris. Her hair was dressed beautifully; her maid came from Paris also. They were too spellbound by her appearance to be sensitive about their own. In the presence of this splendour, overawed and yet delighted by it as they were, they could spare no thoughts for their own dowdy old frocks of the season before last, and their hair twisted and coiled into unwilling order by no fingers cunninger than their own.

This time Billy came. He arrived with the grace and assurance of the young prince who knows no law beyond his own inclination. He placed his hands on his mother's shoulders with arrogant affection.

"Here I am, old mums!" he said, patting her fearlessly. "Rather rotten to keep dinner like this. Bally train was twenty minutes late out of Paddington. But you don't mind, mummy? I don't come to see you often."

He then saluted his father cheerfully, Maud Wayling with the charming nonchalance that was part of him, and his sisters with a laugh, a nod, and a wave of the hand that embraced them all in a manner that was the perfection of the casual and the friendly.

Without further apology from the young man they went in to dinner. The meal was quite gay. Billy overflowed with high spirits. He was a perfectly frank and wholesome being, with the merriest laugh and the sunniest temper in the world. From the moment he came into a room you could not help falling in love with him. He was such a beautiful animal, six feet high, a fair-skinned Saxon Adonis with every muscle in play. The very striking features of his race, with which his sisters were a little overburdened, were to him a decided embellishment. His complexion any woman might have envied; its pink bloom was the fruit of health, expensive living, and exercise in the open air. His blond moustache could compete with any in the service. He had a pair of very blue eyes, large, bold, wide-set, merry, and fearless. It was not to be wondered at that their possessor's great claim to distinction rested on the fact that he was one of

the most intrepid "No. 3's" that ever rode on to a polo ground.

To this amiable tyrant every member of his family bowed down. He had his foot on the necks of them all. It was no secret that he could twist his mother round his little finger. His father might fulminate against him in his absence, even as he had done now, but he was really no better able to withstand the blandishments of Billy than anybody else. Who could withstand his free, affectionate, light-hearted ways? Certainly not his sisters. They vied with one another in a proper adoration. To them he was always the one legitimate young prince who set the standard of youthful manhood. He had no peer in those reverent eyes.

Everybody tried to spoil him; even at Eton he had been the most popular boy in Sixpenny. His winning ways had defeated his tutors and playfellows with ridiculous ease. It had been the simplest thing in the world for him to steal any horse to which his fancy turned, while his companions, were hardly permitted to look over the hedge of the field in which that particular quadruped wagged its tail.

During dinner Billy did not offer a word in explanation of his strange absence of the fortnight past. Certainly he referred to his bad luck at bridge. In that period he had lost one hundred and ninety pounds; an admission which gave colour to his father's theory that his club had been his hiding-place.

"Fact is, I'm dead out of luck," he said cheerfully. "I've been having wretched luck with my ponies lately. By the way, mummy, I got your cheque all right. My tailor fellow is getting a bit restive though. I'd go to some other authorized robber if it were not that the only way to keep him civil is to order new clothes whether you want 'em or not. Unreasonable set of people—tailors."

The unreasonableness of tailors formed perhaps the most pregnant fact in the experience of the young prince. A little whimsically he looked round the table for condolence. His mother smiled humorously, although, to be sure, she took in her breath rather sharp; his father gave a weary guffaw; his sisters declared as one that tailors were abominable;

while Maud Wayling, as usual, did not say anything, but contented herself with looking at Billy pensively with an odd droop in the corners of her mouth.

After dinner, Billy, who was the incarnation of energy, initiated his sisters into the mysteries of a new parlour game. For that purpose he produced a small wooden box acquired in Regent Street that afternoon ; so that presently the joust of ball and battledore resounded from the billiard-room. Billy, of course, was easily first in this martial exercise, although the Miss Brokes were fain to admit that Maud Wayling played a far better game than was to have been expected. But she had played before, as Joan made her confess when the eldest daughter of the house of Broke was ignominiously defeated in "a love set." The proceedings became really interesting when Joan, whose haughty spirit could not brook defeat, challenged Miss Wayling to a second encounter. But even on this occasion she fared little better, in spite of the mighty efforts she put forth. Again she had to bow the knee to the victorious Maud, this time with a special colour in her face as she performed that action.

There was one circumstance that struck Billy's sisters that evening with surprise. He hardly spoke a word to Maud ; in fact, had such a thing been possible, it almost seemed that, like themselves, he was a little in awe of her. Considering the special relation they had come to occupy towards one another it could not be with him as with them ; surely he could not be a little afraid and a little mistrustful of her too. All the same there was something in his bearing which gave them to think. But their sense of delicacy was far too great to allow such speculations to take shape in words.

CHAPTER XIII

AFFORDS THE SPECTACLE OF A WOMAN OF THE WORLD
COPING WITH DIFFICULTIES

DIRECTLY he had eaten his breakfast the next morning Billy linked his arm through his mother's in his affectionate and familiar way.

"I say, mummy, my leave's up to-day; I shall have to get back to-night; and before I go I want to have a word with you privately about something that's—well—that's annoyed me."

"That's annoyed *you*, my precious lamb," said his mother tenderly, letting her hand lie on his arm. "What can it be, I wonder! To think that anything should have annoyed *you*!"

Billy, by the time he had closed the door of his mother's room, had concluded that he must be careful. He knew her little ways; therefore he made a dash at the subject with as little preface as possible.

"You see, it's like this, you wily old thing. They've been sticking their rotten paragraphs into their rotten papers about Maud and me. People do nothing but congratulate me. They write to me; stop me in the street; pat me on the back whenever they see me; when is the happy day and so on! I'm having a cheery time, I can tell you. Why, I am even having presents sent me. Now I want your advice, mummy. You are such a wise old bird; you are so awfully clever. Ought I to write and contradict it, or would it be better to ignore it? But then, you see, even if I ignore it other people won't."

His mother's countenance assumed a very charming expression.

"What an absurd boy!" she said in a voice like a flute.

"Absurd!" said Billy. "Why, it is a pretty serious thing, you know, to have it printed in the papers and so on, that a man is going to marry a girl when he has no intention. It is awkward, mummy."

"I don't quite understand, my pet."

"Why, it says in the papers that a marriage has been arranged between Maud and myself."

"Well, my precious?"

The note of interrogation was truly beatific.

"Well, mummy?" said Billy blankly.

For the moment mother and son stood looking at one another in a way that a third person might have found diverting. Humour lurked at the corners of Mrs. Broke's lips, and an amused smile was in her eyes; on the other hand, the light of mirth was conspicuously absent from her son's crimson countenance.

"Oh! you know it won't do at all!" he said, breaking the silence rather awkwardly. "You are playing a game, my dear; but it isn't quite the right one, you know."

His mother offered a gentle rebuke.

Billy shook his head ruefully. "Maud's a million times too good for a chap like me, don't you know?"

"You are talking nonsense, my pet, aren't you? I am sure dear Maud is devoted to you."

"Can't help her good taste, mummy." Somehow the laugh seemed a little out of key. Rather anxiously the young man drew a handkerchief of vivid hue out of one sleeve and tucked it carefully in the other.

"Perhaps you are a little alarmed, my darling, by her beautiful nature. You must believe me, my dear one, when I assure you that at present you are all a little inclined to underrate dear Maud. She is a little reserved, dear child, but you will find her nature very sweet and affectionate when you grow to appreciate it more."

"Oh, yes, mummy, I dare say."

"My angel!" said his mother in tones that sang, "do you feel that one of your years has had the experience necessary to choose for himself? One must have arrived at a period of

full development to be a competent judge in a matter of this kind. Your father was thirty when he married me, and I was twenty-five ; and then of course we took the advice of our parents. Believe me, my precious, there is a certain matured knowledge of the world required for the choosing of a wife. You cannot have a new one every year ; you cannot order a new one for every change of mood or phase of fashion. One has to choose the qualities that will wear well, as dear Doctor Primrose said."

"Suppose I don't want a wife ? How do you know I want a wife, mummy ? "

"There again, my precious, I am sure the wise course would be to put yourself in the hands of those who have had more experience. Surely, my dear one, if your own mother does not know what your requirements are, may I ask who does ? "

Billy had no talent for argument, as he would have been the first to admit. He felt that the most facile of reasoners would have routed him utterly and put him to shame. On this final point she had urged he had no reply to make to his mother. As soon as it came to argument he knew he could not stand up before her. All the same he was tenacious in the matter of his ideas. Their scarcity rendered them choice. He set himself down as a fool, and his mother set him down as deficient in character, but if he once took an idea into his head it required a great deal of getting out again. He was like his father in that. The fact was there to confront all who had to grapple with either father or son, that although they were subscribers to very few ideas indeed, for each had an instinctive dislike of such mischievous things, once let them be planted in their minds, and they took a deal of uprooting. His mother, who knew far more about the young man than he knew about himself, could not help feeling there was a certain perverseness in the fact that one whose mental habit hardly permitted him to carry two ideas under his hat, should yet at this moment be in possession of one so unfortunate.

Deficient in character as he was, this one little idea enabled him to keep his head up and his flag flying. He

might be at a loss for a reply in words to his mother's reasoning, but he continued rather doggedly to confront her. To be sure, he was a little agitated, but there was a kind of crassness in him that nothing could defeat. Mrs. Broke had had occasion more than once to deplore it in his father. She had her experiences in handling that Briton to guide her. In most things father and son would listen to reason, as dispensed by herself the never-failing fount. But there were just one or two in which they were not so amenable.

Billy's scruples, or rather his prejudices, would call for delicacy. The foolish fellow must be handled tenderly. His mother saw at once that argument, mellifluous as it was when it flowed from her Pierian lips, would not have a straw's weight with him. In the fullness of her wisdom, therefore, she decided to waive the matter. With his father's character to guide her, and recalling the mistakes of her early married life, she closed the discussion rather abruptly. When the time came she would have to be prepared to force the young gentleman's hand.

Not another word passed between mother and son on this subject. Billy returned to his regiment that afternoon. He went as light-heartedly as he came, with a frank adieu to everybody and a useful cheque in his pocket-book. His sisters in a body accompanied him on bicycles to Cuttisham railway station. All the way along the avenue they laughed and chattered gaily, but the voice of Billy was the gayest of all. It was impossible not to be happy when this splendid brother was of the company. He was as hail-fellow-well-met with them as with the rest of the world. He chaffed them, teased them, made them his comrades. Well might they worship the ground on which he trod !

Miss Wayling was not of the party. Billy had taken his leave of her in the drawing-room ; a very pleasant and friendly good-bye. A hyper-sensitive person might have seen something a little perfunctory in it, but certainly nothing was expressed in that charming manner of which any one had a right to complain. Still, no sooner had the gay voices died away down the drive than Miss Wayling went to her room, turned out her maid who was altering an

evening-gown, and locked the door. She sat looking into the fire for several hours in a mechanical way. Some burden had apparently come upon her thoughts.

She did not appear again in public until dinner, and then it was remarked by her critics that she was even duller, if possible, than before Billy came. Perhaps she was upset by his going away so soon; certainly they had never seen anybody look so sad as she that evening.

At bedtime, as Maud was lighting a candle, Mrs. Broke spoke words of consolation.

"You must not take his off-handedness too seriously, my dear child," she said in her velvet voice. "Men *are* like that. They strive always to hide their real feelings; they are so afraid of giving themselves away, poor dears. And I am afraid Billy is as bad as the rest. I recall how miserable I was in the presence of the inscrutable self-control of Mr. Broke in similar circumstances. Ah, me! the tortures of doubt and fear I endured, and all the time my dear Edmund was morbidly afraid of giving himself away! But believe me, my dear child, you could not wish for a better augury of happiness. When you have come to know men better you will realize that the staunchest are those who strive to conceal in our presence the depth of the feelings with which they regard us."

Miss Wayling had no reply to make to these words of solace, yet they did not seem to take away her gloom. At Mrs. Broke's earnest request she continued to stay on at Covenden. The kind woman was never tired of affirming that dear Maud was a seventh daughter to her and a great comfort to have in the house. She declared that the other six were in the nature of a trial, who brought little consolation to one so feminine as herself. "We have so little in common, my dear Maud. They are so unfeminine; they ought to have been men. I really don't know what I should have done had *you* been like them."

Miss Wayling was a little puzzled, a little distressed by the fact that all the world had come to regard her as Billy's fiancée. Yet in a vague way she supposed it was all right. Colonel Rouse, her guardian, wrote her the kindest letters. He

congratulated her heartily on her good fortune. The Brokes were a most charming family. He hardly knew how to express his delight that everything had been arranged so satisfactorily.

Maud, accustomed to depend so much on others—no princess of a reigning house was shielded more sedulously from the rubs of the world—was compelled to believe that the whole thing was in order. True, Billy had not been any more lavish of his attention of late than had been his wont formerly. Ever since the far-off days of their first coming together, nobody had seemed so indifferent to her presence as was he. And now when she had the temerity to hope that he might be a little less austere in his treatment of her, he seemed to bestow no special attention upon her, and sometimes she thought he even went to the length of avoiding her. And he did not favour her with his correspondence. Yet surely he must have spoken of her to others; how else could affairs have reached their present phase? It was all very mysterious, but she supposed that everything was as it should be, since persons of the widest experience and the deepest wisdom, a cabinet of her chosen ministers, had the matter in hand and were pledged to see it through.

Still, it was not in the least like what she could have wished it to be. Surely every man could not affect the aloofness of Billy, and observe such a lordly disregard for the object of his affections. There was too much of maiden fancy in her to allow her to think for a moment that it was the universal custom for marriage to be entered upon in this cold-blooded manner. Still, in many cases it must be so, or her friends would have been alive to the phenomenon. Somebody must have told her, had it been altogether unusual. Every day brought letters of congratulation from her friends. The announcement in the newspapers had been seen by all. One or two of her girl friends wrote to say how delightful it must be to be in love, and how delightful also to be beloved by such a perfect dear as Billy Broke. One tender damsel wanted to know, was it a case of love at first sight? And everybody agreed that she must be quite the happiest girl in the world.

In none of the letters she wrote in reply, not even in that to her guardian, from whom she had never kept a secret before, did she allow herself to make the confession that she could have wished her engagement to be a more romantic affair. She was too proud to confess to anybody, almost too proud to confess to herself, that she felt her position keenly. Her nature was too sensitive to permit her to open her heart to others and let them see how and why she suffered. The one crumb of solace she could allow herself was that she and Billy had been boy and girl together. He was always at her guardian's in his schooldays. She was compelled to admit, as it were for her own countenance, that familiarity did breed contempt in a sense, even in two persons engaged to be married.

In the meantime, if Billy wrote no letters to Maud, he sent more than one to his mother. They were conceived in a rather doleful key. He complained that so far from people allowing the distasteful subject to drop they continued to insist on it in a manner that was really becoming offensive. All the world took it for granted that he was actually engaged. Even Maud's guardian, who of all men should have been well informed, treated it as an accomplished fact. Billy did not know when he had been so disturbed; several times he had been on the verge of telling the old fool that he went altogether beyond the mark. He exhorted his mother to write at once to Colonel Rouse. He himself would have done so, only it was the sort of thing a chap avoided if he possibly could. It made you feel such an ass.

In several of these ingenuous letters Billy urged upon his mother the necessity of allaying such a monstrously false impression. She must contradict it in the newspapers where the mischief had begun. Moreover, he never ceased to assure her that Maud was a million times too good for a chap like himself.

As letter succeeded letter, Mrs. Broke began to feel that the matter was entering upon a difficult phase. She had been so much in the habit of wielding an unquestioned authority over her family, that it was not easy for her to realize that her beautifully conceived plans for its welfare

were in danger. From the moment the young man had first delighted and flattered the world by appearing in it he had been humoured in all things. It had not been thought necessary to rear the godlike youth in the fashion of his sisters. The young prince is the young prince. He must be allowed to work out his destiny untrammelled by the checks and precepts imposed upon humbler mortals by the guardians of youth. But now the possibility was beginning to take shape in the mind of the hero's mother that such a latitude had not been altogether wise.

His contrariness had merely amused her at first. But now she was growing a little afraid. Dating from her last interview with the young man she was haunted with the father's capacity for unreason which she was now able to trace so clearly in the son. Here was a factor which might spoil everything. The intervention of an hereditary despotism was capable of shattering the pleasant scheme in a thousand pieces. Human foresight cannot cope with that. From the moment the young man had shown signs of the fatal tendency the wise lady had not slept quite so peacefully at night.

Her own letters to him had been very tactfully expressed. She had been careful to show no spark of resentment of an attitude which she hinted delicately he must know to be perverse. She had soothed him, humoured him, neglected no means of reconciling him to the inevitable. Now and again she appealed tenderly on behalf of the maternal relation to which fate had appointed her, and with beautiful humility besought him to trust to her judgment implicitly because she was acting for the best, not only as far as he himself was concerned, but as regarded every member of his family. If it were possible she desired to spare him the blow to his pride which was bound to follow the revelation that what the whole thing really amounted to was a *mariage de convenance*. She had a considerable sense of delicacy. Even if he was too obtuse to see where his duty lay, she had yet no wish to wound him by insisting upon it unduly. But even that course, a little degrading as it was perhaps, must be taken if "her precious" did not soon appear in a more reasonable light.

She wrote several letters in which the financial position of his family was clearly indicated, and one at least that bore a veiled reference to Maud's. It was the first time that so crude a course had been taken with the young prince ; and his mother felt it keenly. She had a slight sense of shame. It hurt her very much to embarrass her precious with these rather sordid details. But it has to be confessed that it hurt her more when her precious showed no disposition to be embarrassed by them. The letters she received in return betrayed a well-bred avoidance of the unpleasant topic ; his passing over of the coarse allusion to the amount of Maud's income was equally admirable. His mother grew a little hurt by that which in another might have seemed like callousness. So acutely did it touch her, that she even went to the length of insinuating veiled charges against the hero of misuse of the money with which he had been furnished so freely, and of extravagance in his way of life. It was a charge that none had dared to prefer against the young Apollo until that dark hour. He replied that when you were in the Blues you had to do as the Blues did.

Such indications of high policy underlying the affair were not, however, without their effect. Billy's letters of protest grew less frequent, less disconcertingly frank. Thereupon his mother, only too eager to find a favourable omen in this modification of attitude, wrote a very prettily-worded letter for his benefit. She wished to know when would be a convenient time for the wedding. Had her precious any feeling about time or place ? If so he had only to make it known. But it was becoming essential that something should be settled without further delay.

To these pleasant inquiries there came no reply. Billy's epistolary powers gave out abruptly.

After a week of silence Mrs. Broke wrote again in similar terms. Another week went by, but still no answer arrived to either of these communications. She grew rather uneasy. It was not Billy's habit to be silent. He was such a frank, outspoken creature as a rule.

By the time three weeks had gone by she had grown more

than a little afraid. To say the least, the situation seemed a trifle ominous. She could hardly believe that Billy would prove recalcitrant. For one thing she didn't think he had it in him. But, after all, heredity could never be left wholly out of the case. In the background was the shadow of the sire—of that sire who was a baffling mixture of easy tolerance and frank despotism. There were points on which Edmund could be the most arbitrary man alive. He belonged to a race that was ridiculously simple to deal with up to a certain point ; but beyond that point they were liable to get the bit in their teeth and take charge. History had recorded instances.

In the midst of these rather rueful speculations there came a letter from Billy which somewhat sharply resolved her doubts.

CHAPTER XIV

IN WHICH A BOMB IS THROWN RIGHT INTO THE MIDDLE
OF THE STORY

IT was a characteristic production, dated "Windsor, Wednesday," and was to inform his mother that the previous day he was married in London.

His good old mummy was not to be very down on him, as he had married the best little girl in all the world. She was to break the news to his father when he was in a propitious mood—"after dinner when he had a good day." He hoped his good old mummy would not judge either of them hastily; she must first see his dear little girl before she made up her mind about her.

It was well perhaps for the letter's recipient that she could claim to be a hard-bitten woman of the world. An indomitable clearness of vision, a certain stoicism of spirit, and a resolute looking of facts in the face had grown to be a kind of second nature with her. It was indeed well that she was not accustomed to flinch at trifles, for if instead of making that communication Billy had doubled his fist and hit out with all his strength, he could not have dealt his mother a fiercer blow.

It was at the breakfast-table that this painful operation had occurred. The girls were laughing and talking, and were discussing eagerly the proposed incursion of the field that was shortly to be made; they were also eating bacon and drinking coffee in a very fearless manner. Their father was reading a leading article in *The Times*, and was in the act of enunciating, "that one of these days we shall be driven to take decisive action in the Transvaal."

This preoccupation of the members of her household served Mrs. Broke. Any agitation she might have shown excited no remark. Presently, however, Broke, casting the newspaper aside, inquired if Billy had written again, as some time had passed since his previous letter.

"No, he has not," said Mrs. Broke placidly.

At the earliest moment she escaped to her morning-room. In that security she read again her son's communication. Every word seemed to burn itself into her brain.

Even then it took some little time before she could grasp with any sense of adequacy all the facts as there set forth.

If words meant anything Billy was married. The significance of such a fact was too wide-reaching to be at once understood. But in the first place, and most obviously, it put an end to this affair with Maud. In other words it meant financial ruin. They had held on for several years with no other prospect than Billy's ultimate marriage with her. Only Mr. Breffit and their bankers knew how compromised they were. Here was an end to that pathetic keeping up of appearances; that perpetual seeking of ways and means, that perpetual putting off of the evil day. Even her husband and his agent did not know the full extent of the difficulties they had had to face. She alone knew that, and she alone knew why they had faced them. But it was over now.

This was but a survey of her first fragmentary thoughts. After a while other fears floated to the surface of her mind. The aspect in which they represented the matter might not be so final in one sense, but in another it was hardly less embarrassing to a mother's mind. Billy had withheld certain important details in regard to the person he had married. It was true that he allowed her to be the "sweetest little girl in the whole world," but even in the midst of the revels of description in which his idyllic fancy painted her charms a cold feeling came over the unhappy lady that the subject of them might turn out to be a housemaid.

Of course, on the face of things that did not seem probable. After all, the wretched fellow was her son and the son of his father. He might choose to ruin his family rather than submit his will to that of another, but it was hardly likely

that he would wantonly degrade himself and those whom he held dear. But as she pondered the ways of young men with a tendency to wildness in them ; when her thoughts reverted twenty years back to the tragi-comedy of her brother Charles and the star of the Light Comedy firmament, she was fain to admit that there were occasions when youth would indulge its foibles.

There was really no saying to whom he was married. But at least the chance was slight that his wife would turn out to be presentable. No girl of the right kind would consent to be whirled into matrimony in this surreptitious fashion. Her friends at least would have a word to say on the subject.

Most probably she had no friends. The chances were that she was something hopeless ; a chorus girl, a barmaid, an adventuress of one kind or another, who taking advantage of the wretched fellow's frame of mind had cleverly entrapped him.

After an hour spent in deliberation of this bitter kind, Mrs. Broke sent a telegram to her son : " Meet me at Aunt Mary's at Mount Street this afternoon. Shall wait until you come." She also sent a telegram to her sister to say that she was coming up to town that morning on important business. She was essentially a woman of action. There was just time to catch the ten-fifteen train from Cuttisham. Telling Broke briefly that she had to go up to town, and that she might have to stay the night at Mount Street, the redoubtable lady set forth on her pilgrimage, and got to the station in time for the train.

On the way up to town, in a compartment she had to herself, she was able to review the matter again at her leisure. Recurring for the tenth time to the fatal letter, she grew convinced that Billy in his headlong folly and wilfulness had fallen a victim to one who, with a vagueness that was wholly admirable, she termed an adventuress. And assuming that to be the case, all was not yet lost. It was well known that that kind of person generally had a former husband in the background, who had the trick of issuing from his obscurity at a dramatic moment. When this happy possibility came into her mind, a lurid picture was thrown across it of a

drunken villain springing forward to levy blackmail. The distressed lady had too keen a sense of the ludicrous not to laugh at her own extravagance a little ; but when one is suffering pain of an acute kind one is apt to seek relief in the contemplation of weird and drastic remedies.

CHAPTER XV

L'ÉGOÏSME À DEUX

HER sister Mary was the wife of a Cabinet Minister and was famous in the social world. She was a cheerful soul, an amiable savage whose odd reputation for philanthropy entitled her to a place in a museum, as would that of a devil fish endowed with the domestic affections. Her mission in life seemed to be to open bazaars for charitable objects ; also to misrepresent her face and person by the aid of science, and afterwards even more sedulously to misrepresent them by the aid of the illustrated press. Notoriety was her passion ; and she went about doing good, attended by footman and reporters and the applause of her claue. Her appearance, which owed considerably more to art than to nature, was as familiar as that of royalty itself in the shops of Regent Street ; and almost every day she published a new scheme in the newspapers—her sworn and bosom friends—for the amelioration of the human race and the animal creation. She was the perpetual president of that famous and old-established Society for Providing the Basutos with Red Braces.

The strain of keeping in the centre of the public eye had made her prematurely old. It was an open secret that she used belladonna to brighten her eyes, and cocaine to brighten her intellect. She kept the best cook and the worst company in London. Her claim to distinction in her own set was that she was the only woman in it who had been able to retain the husband with whom fate had decorated her. She was known to fame as the Honourable Mrs. Twysden-Cockshot, and her husband the Right Honourable Reginald, the President of the Board of Supererogation, had not put

his foot over the threshold of his wife's residence in Mount Street for thirteen years. He divided his time between the House of Commons and his club. In the popular magazines, however, the satisfaction was his of seeing his name included among those of the fortunate many who owed their success in life to their wives. He could also have added, which he was much too chivalrous to do, that he was qualifying to have his name added to the list of those who owed to their wives their appearance in the Court of Bankruptcy. However, he was no longer responsible for her debts.

To Mount Street came Mrs. Broke in her distress. She only went to poor dear Mary's when there were no houses sweeter in repute to afford sanctuary. The name of Aunt Mary was seldom mentioned in the family of Covenden. She belonged to the category of those of whom one does not speak unless one is obliged. Still there were occasions when Aunt Mary and more especially Aunt Mary's house had their uses. To-day the latter chanced to occupy this fortunate position in the eyes of Mrs. Broke.

When that lady arrived at Mount Street on the stroke of twelve she was glad to find that her sister was abroad in the world already and was not expected home to luncheon. She was in no mood to cope with her just then. All the afternoon she sat in the drawing-room waiting for the coming of Billy. Her impatience she strove to allay with attempts at reading. A few minutes before five he was announced.

"Ha, old mums!" he said, with his habitual arrogant cheeriness, "so here we are!"

"Will you have a cup of tea, my precious?"

Her accents were as prodigiously sweet as when he had interviewed her last.

"Thanks awf'ly."

Mrs. Broke watched him a little curiously while he put cream and sugar in his tea, stirred it, and drank it, and noted that his self-possession was as perfect as her own. Then she said:

"What did you mean by that rather stupid letter you sent me this morning? Do you know you rather alarmed me, my lamb?"

"It was bit sudden, wasn't it?" said the young man.

"What was a bit sudden, my precious?"

"That letter."

"Really one can hardly say that. It was three whole weeks since you wrote before."

"Was it so long as that? I didn't think it was so long; how the time does get on, doesn't it?"

"It does, my love," said his mother, widening her eyes and beaming upon him steadily.

Billy met them with imperturbability. He rubbed one hand cautiously round his silk hat.

"I think, mummy, I'll have another cup of tea. The tea is very nice."

"Do."

Mrs. Broke continued to look at her son steadily. The smile was still in her eyes; her voice was low and calm and under very great control.

"What did you mean precisely, my darling, by that ridiculous assertion that you were married yesterday morning?"

"Ridiculous!" said Billy easily. "Why ridiculous, mummy? I don't quite see how the truth can be ridiculous."

"Then it is true?"

"Of course. I wouldn't pull your leg like that."

"And who, pray, is the favoured person?"

There was the half-smile still lurking in the cool blue eyes. There was the same suggestion of slight amusement with which she had begun the conversation.

"She's a peach," said Billy.

"Who, my love?"

"A peach."

"I don't think I know the family. I believe there are some people called Mowbray Peach in Warwickshire. But I cannot say that I enjoy the pleasure of their acquaintance."

"I don't mean people at all, you dear old thing," said Billy, laughing heartily. "A peach—a regular picture, you know. Something sweet and tempting and good to look at."

"And who is this person who is sweet and tempting and good to look at?"

"My wife," said Billy, taking his hat off one knee and placing it on the other.

"Of course, my dear. But who was she before she was your wife?"

The young man paused. He carefully put back his hat on his other knee.

"You must promise, my dear old mums," he said, after due reflection, "that if I tell you, you will not be prejudiced and all that. You must promise that you will not despise her for what she has been."

"I am afraid I cannot enter into any promises of that kind."

"Then I am afraid I cannot tell you, my dear."

Mother and son found themselves looking fixedly at one another. It was the first time in their lives that they had found themselves afflicted with a sense of antagonism in their personal relations. It was as sudden as it was unforeseen. In spite of the mantle of her stoicism, the redoubtable lady felt a curious little shiver in her veins. She was face to face with a lifelong error. From the day of his birth she had thought she knew all there was to know about Billy. Here and now she was confronted with the knowledge of how completely she had deceived herself.

"I promise, my darling," she said humbly.

"Bible oath, you know, old mums," said Billy, with a short laugh.

"Don't be silly, my pet. I am not in the habit of making promises unless I intend to keep them."

"No, of course. But you see, she is my wife now, and—er—I may be a bit sensitive for her, don't you know. She's mine, don't you know; and if I thought anybody was going to cross her, or annoy her, or make her feel miserable they should not see her, mummy, do you see?"

"You are lucidity itself. But why, may I ask, should I of all people, your own foolish old mother, who has doted on you all your life, be likely to act like this towards the—the—er—person you have chosen to marry?"

"I certainly don't know why you should. But one don't always quite know where one is with you, you wily old

woman ; and if you don't mind my saying it, you dear old mummy, you can be very down on people when you like: I've seen you give those poor kid sisters o' mine 'gyp,' I can tell you. Oh, I know you! Now this dear little kid of mine is the sweetest little girl in the world and the best ; and if ever I allowed my dear old mummy to come along and make her pretty eyes red for her, I should never forgive myself."

"You speak in riddles, my dear one. Why or how I should make the pretty eyes of the—the—er—person red, I fail to understand. May I ask, she is not one of those fashionable persons who have a past?"

"Lord, no!" said Billy, with vehemence. He placed his hat on the carpet out of the way of danger. "What a rotten thing to say, mummy!"

"It was, my pet," said his mother, with beautiful humility. "I am sure I beg your pardon. But, really, you alarm me so with your hums and haws, that I hardly know how to place her. Come now, my dear one, please reveal to me in just two plain words who this person is I understand you to have married."

"Well, if you must know, she is a little girl out of Perkin and Warbeck's shop in Bond Street, the right-hand side, you know, going out of Piccadilly."

"Thank you, my darling ; that is all I wished to know."

There was not a flicker in the smiling face. Perhaps the lips were a little tighter than was their wont. They were drawn in until her mouth was set in a sharp straight line. Billy thought he had never seen the hard lights dance quite so quickly and so luminously in her eyes. As he looked at her he could not help feeling that his mother was magnificent.

"Mummy, you are rather a brick." The admiration in his voice was part of the frankness he always allowed himself.

"Will you have another cup of tea? There is just one left, I think, if it is not too cold."

"Thank you very much," said Billy. "I think I will."

He picked up his hat again and placed it a little farther out of the way of danger. His mother poured out his third

cup of tea and presented it to him with a hand that did not shake.

"I suppose, my angel," she said in a low, matter-of-fact voice, "you know that you have ruined us all?"

"Oh, rot, mummy!" said the young man cheerfully. "You mustn't talk like that, you know. You are not going to take on about it; you are much too sensible an old bird."

"We are ruined completely and effectually."

"You mustn't talk like that, you know. I took a bold step, but it doesn't mean that, I am sure. She is such a *good* little girl."

"Our very existence depended on your marriage with Maud. We are hopelessly compromised in a financial sense, and now in a social one——"

"Suppose you don't say it?" said Billy, with a coaxing air.

"Very well, my precious, I will not. But I think it right that you should be brought face to face with the state of affairs in which your somewhat unfortunate, not to say hasty, act has involved us."

"Whether it is unfortunate or not, mummy, remains to be seen, but in any case you can hardly call it hasty. I had been thinking of it for some little time, but I'll admit that when this business of Maud came along it may have forced my hand a bit. But now I've taken the plunge I've sort of made my bed, don't you know, and—and why, there you are!"

"I don't doubt, my love, that what you say is perfectly true; but may I ask why you did not take *me* into your confidence at any rate before you embarked on such a step?"

"I hope, you dear old thing, you didn't expect me to be such a juggins? There would have been an awful fuss; besides, I was obliged to keep it from the regiment. It was a rather ticklish affair, I don't mind telling you."

Mrs. Broke drew in her breath in several sharp little gasps.

"Do you quite think you ought to congratulate yourself, my darling?" she asked a little wearily.

"It's a day's work I wouldn't undo."

"Then you are wholly insensible, my angel, to the disgrace and ruin of your family?"

"There you go, mummy," said Billy, with pathos, "making a fuss! I wish now I hadn't told you."

"You must please forgive me, my dear one," said his mother, with winning humility.

All the same at that moment, had she held a lethal weapon in her hand, she might conceivably have slain her son. Not only was she crushed to earth by the realization of her worst fears—a girl out of Perkin and Warbeck's shop in Bond Street belonged emphatically to the category of the "hopeless" without even the saving clause of an adventuress with a husband to levy blackmail—but at the same time she was bitterly angry. The young man's obstinacy she could understand, but his reckless folly was hard to forgive.

Still, she was a woman of insight. And she recognized that such a self-absorption was not altogether remarkable in one bred in Billy's particular school. The power was hers to look at things in a detached and impartial way. She knew that Billy, as herself, her husband, her kindred and the great majority of the privileged people among whom her lot had been cast, was only too apt to see things from one angle of vision. Full many an instance of an almost wolfish self-centredness had she found in her gilded seminary. At times she had been a little appalled by these naïve worshippers at the shrine of self. There seemed to be a subtle poison in the atmosphere they breathed. It was only to be expected of Billy, who was blood of their blood, bone of their bone, that he should be too much at the mercy of his own immediate point of view to spare a thought to that of people who had a right to look for some little consideration at his hands. She had the strength to admit, even in that dark hour, that after all his cruel egotism was not so very remarkable. She would not blame him for that. It was his mad infatuation, his desperate folly for which cheerfully she could have slain him.

"May I ask, my precious, what you propose to do with your wife now you have married her?" she said in the tone of gentleness she had used from the beginning.

"I don't quite know, as yet. I suppose we shall rub along."

"I confess, my darling, that I foresee obstacles rising in your path."

"I was afraid there might be one or two. Have you told my father yet?"

"I have not told him. And to be perfectly candid I hardly dare to tell him. Unless I misjudge your father completely he will make a tragedy of it."

"Yes, he has rather the reputation of being an eccentric in some things. I think, mummy, it may be wise to break the news to him a bit."

"I agree with you entirely. And I beg you to leave the matter in my hands. Nothing must be done in haste. There is poor Maud to think of. One hardly knows how to face all the consequences. One must have time to think this thing out at one's leisure. Do not speak of it to any one. Our social credit is at stake. Something is due to us as a family. Your poor sisters may be prejudiced. We may have to submit to derision. I must charge you to absolute secrecy, my precious; you must place the affair in my hands unreservedly."

The young man assented with a slight feeling of relief. He was not so far gone in his infatuation as to have lost entirely his sense of proportion. He foresaw that it would be a bitter pill for his world to swallow. He was prompt to acquiesce therefore in his mother's request. It took the burden of a rather irksome duty off his shoulders.

He could not help admiring his mother. She might smile forever and talk in tones of honey, but she couldn't deceive him. He knew she was badly hit. He had never seen a more finished piece of acting than he had been treated to this afternoon. It was no mean exhibition of the art because he guessed she had been knocked about pretty severely by the blow he had dealt her, and now, however composed she might appear, she was really shattered and trembling from the consequences of it, and was bleeding fiercely underneath her laugh.

"I must write to your wife, or call upon her, my dear one. Where is she living at present?"

Billy hesitated. He looked at his mother searchingly.

"Honest Injun, mummy? You can be trusted with her? She's a timid little soul."

"Yes, my darling, you can trust me."

"Well—er—the address is 17 Cromwell Villas, Hampden Road, London, N."

"Write it down."

"Here is a business card with it printed on it. She lives with an aunt who is a dressmaker, but I'm looking out for a little box for her in the country."

Billy took out his cigarette-case, and selecting from it a piece of pasteboard, not particularly clean, with some printing upon it, gave it to his mother. She accepted it with the same outward composure, although it revolted her a little as her fingers touched it.

Sworn to perfect secrecy, Billy presently left his mother to catch his train. Mrs. Broke having decided to remain in town that night, sent a telegram to Covenden. She then surrendered herself to her aching thoughts. She was a woman of courage, but as she sat alone in that huge drawing-room lit with dim lamps, with the silence and the loneliness emphasizing the beatings of her heart, she had that dull sense of calamity that afflicts the railway passenger who, having gone to sleep in the night mail, awakes with a shock to find himself buried in a void of débris and darkness and the icy air freezing the sweat upon his face. She had now passed from the first phase of semi-consciousness of this hapless traveller to one of a slowly-maturing sensibility: when the questions, "Where am I? What has happened to me?" have given place to "I wonder if I am mortally hurt; I hope there is nothing internal; I suppose this wet stuff trickling into my eyes must be blood!" Mrs. Broke knew the nature of her accident; she was now trying to find out just what her injuries were.

This she could not do. She knew positively that she was severely mauled; she felt as though she were going to die; but her predicament was so strange, that she could not say what the immediate future had in store. Her fine scheme for the restoration of the fortunes of her house had been shattered to pieces in the very moment of its culmination.

She had been congratulated ; her wisdom and her cleverness had been extolled ; she had been the object of envy ; but as she had raised the cup to her lips it had been wantonly dashed to the ground in a calculated, heartlessly cruel and ironical manner.

She might have forgiven the author of the act had it been one of impulse ; there is hardly any act too insane to be unpardonable in the sight of the human mother. But it had proved to be a calculated blow in which her son exulted. He had married this creature in the clear and full assurance that she alone had the power to make an appeal to his nature.

It was singular that young men should be subject to such wild hallucinations as these. Bitterly she recalled the parallel case of her brother Charles. On that occasion his friends learned in time of the disaster which threatened him and were able to rescue him from the hands of the sordid vulgarian who had hypnotized him with her animal beauty. Mrs. Broke was convinced that a similar thing had happened to Billy, only in his case there was the important reservation that the gods had not thought fit to intervene. As usual they were on the side of the big battalions. Charles's family was strong enough even to withstand the social ruin of its eldest son. Billy's was not. Be sure the malicious gods had taken those facts into their consideration !

She had made up her mind already that the young woman whose local habitation was Cromwell Villas, Hampden Road London, N., belonged to the class of Miss Maisie Malone herself. However, she would go and see her. Maimed as she was she still had spirit enough to be faintly amused at Billy's solicitude. His anxiety for the fine feelings of " the dearest little girl in the world " would have been true comedy from the stalls at the play. Real life, it seemed, was still hard to beat as a dramatist. But she would go and see for herself. For she still clung with frantic tenacity to her last straw ; an impalpable, vague, ridiculous straw, but a straw undoubtedly. There was still the faint hope that the creature might turn out to be an " adventuress," with a husband in the background, although that belonged rather to the transpontine theatre. Real life,

however, has been known on occasion to turn its hand to melodrama. But her hopes in that direction had been weakened already. Doubtless the creature would prove to be a person of a hopeless propriety. Doubtless she was; even very young men don't marry the other kind. After all the virtue of the lower orders is their only safeguard. Hence their classical maxim, Honesty is the Best Policy.

Fortunately the musings of the galled and suffering lady were interrupted at this point. Her sister Mary flounced into the room, an emanation of rustles and odours. She was marvellously "smart" and quite undaunted in energy, notwithstanding that in the course of the day she had opened three bazaars in outlying parts of the metropolis, had presided at the half-yearly administration of the Fund for Providing Distressed Society Women with Diamond Tiaras, and had presently to dine with a Labour Member at the Carlton Hotel. Her appearance, in the shrewd and merciless eyes of her sister, was decidedly second-rate.

"Hullo, my sister!" she shouted at the top of a voice that was not altogether pleasant. "You here! Two cups. Aha, a man to tea! Fie, you skittish matron. Glad I was out. Sorry I came back. Hope I did not disturb a *tête-à-tête*. Are these the legs of a man I see before me, protruding from under the sofa? No; only my romantic fancy. I wonder, my dear, if I shall ever get rid of my eternal youth."

"I think, my dear, you may hope in time sufficiently to disguise it," purred Mrs. Broke as she looked her over placidly.

"Ha! you darling old cat, you keep your claws as sharp as ever. What's your game now? Money, sordid, humiliating pelf, or has Juno come to ask Minerva, 'What Shall We Do With Our Daughters?' Were you the 'Materfamilias' who started the correspondence in *The Times*?"

"No, my dear, but I think if I chose I could furnish the name of the Constant Reader who started the previous one, 'What Shall We Do With Our Husbands?'"

"It is no good, sister. I shall not compete. You are too quick in the uptake. When is Billy going to the altar?"

"Nothing is settled yet."

“ High time, isn't it ? The thing has been lagging superfluous for at least a month. I saw the hero at the Savoy the other night after the play. He was not aggressively sober. A man laid me five to four in ponies that he would be another Charles. I took him on the nail ; they don't know the mamma of *ce preux chevalier*, do they ? How much is the Fair Persian worth—three millions or two ? A nice domesticated creature, with no expensive tastes, I understand. Our hero, straight out of Ouida though he be, will never be able to spend all that on polo ponies. How will he manage to dispose of it ? Can you tell me, my dear ? I suppose numerous deserving charities will benefit.”

“ I refer you to Reginald, my dear. He sits at the feet of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I do not pretend to a knowledge of finance.”

“ Ha, there you go again ! I don't know when your claws were so sharp. Still, it *was* a bit below the belt. But really, my dear, I must hit somebody. I am in a frightful temper.”

“ Settling day ? ”

“ Not at all.”

“ The horrid Mr. Samuel Moses refuses to defer his bill of sale ? ”

“ How *did* you guess ? ”

“ Intuition, my dear—the feminine prerogative.”

“ Well, you are not on the target. No, the fact is I have been having a lot of bad luck lately.”

“ Baccarat ? ”

“ Bookies. I have forsaken the sport of princes for the sport of kings. I don't know when I have been so angry. I had the dead straight from Harry to back Parable for the Nash at hundred to eight. I wired to my bookie, but got a bit mixed in the code. Parable rolled home all right, but Bookie repudiates, and refuses point-blank to tip up the spondulicks. What would you do, darling ? You have a reputation for wisdom.”

“ I confess, my dear, that your conversation is too technical to be followed except by the expert. You out-Charles poor dear Charles. Do I understand you to refer to the Turf ? ”

“ Alas ! my sister, I see you are in no mood to humour my frailties. And I am so cross. I mentioned it to old Justice Sharp last night. He said that if I went to law, and the judge happened to be unusually inexperienced or unusually senile, and I wore my new thing of Raquin’s, a pork pie, trimmed with green *mousseline de soie*, out of which issue a brace of crushed-strawberry turtle doves rampant, from a pale yellow ground slightly erased, which he had already had occasion to admire, I might get my verdict, always providing that the judge was not a naturalist. In that event, he said, I should be committed for contempt and get five years.”

“ When does Reginald introduce his Bill, my dear, for the suppression of judicial humour ? ”

“ How I wish, my sister, that you would keep King Charles’s head out of the conversation. But I don’t want to drag Bookie to a court of law ; you are acquainted, darling, with my horror of publicity. Besides, if I did, it’s a thousand to five, to lay Charles’s favourite odds, that the Nonconformist What-you-call-it would not let me open any more bazaars. Really, unprotected women in the vast metropolis cannot be too careful. Oh, by the way, thank you so much for your tip about Mars and Jupiter Railways that you had from that Salmon man, your neighbour. Very thoughtful, my dear. *That* fish is quite an original. ‘ I hear he is absolutely straight. Oh, and tell me, my dear, what is this about our dear old Edmund, our dear stiff-backed, blue-blooded, simple-minded, penny novelettish feudal baron, about to become a guinea pig ! When I saw his name in the prospectus in this morning’s paper with only two of his initials wrong, I nearly threw a fit. A sordid age, my dear. E. W. A. C. B. Broke, Esquire, J.P., D.L., Covenden, Parkshire, gentleman. A sordid age. I suppose all his ancestors have turned in their tombs in Covenden church already. I suppose the Broke ghost is walking in the east wing. It makes one shudder, and yet I protest there is a touch of the sublime. Poor dear old Edmund ; and they say this is not an age of heroes ! I must have a frame for that prospectus. It marks an epoch. The old order does not merely change,

it wipes itself out. And so fell Broke of Covenden and with him the race of England's gentlemen !

“ How is our dear old Charley One ? I haven't seen him for an age. Please give him my love, and tell him his last keg of whisky poisoned the housekeeper's cat. Tell him Mountain Mist's the tippie. Ask him to mention my name, and to give an order to Johnson, Boswell, and Scott, Carlyle Yard, Bermondsey. You had better not tell him though, my sister, that I have a twenty-five per cent commission on every order that I get, or he will be demanding discount. And how are the 'little chestnut fillies' ? Are they as fond of bacon, and as lean and as leggy, and as nosy and as elbowy, and as uppish and as dull, and as bucolic and as aristocratic and as utterly impossible as ever ? And how is our dear authoress ? I haven't read her latest work as yet, but I bought one at the Stores and presented it to my latest royalty, his Serene Highness the Hereditary Grand Duke of Hochanseltzer. I gave it to him for its moral teaching. He is a wonderfully susceptible young man. He is tickled to death by the moral tone. He has quite given up his old habit of making *sans atout* on the jack of diamonds and the queen of hearts. He says it is superb, *magnifique*, the expression of a spirit. I told him we had little in the way of moral tone to boast about in our family, but what we had we liked the world to wot of. But I chatter, darling, and I must really go and dress. I fear you will have to dine alone. Reginald, of course, is much too busy propping up the empire to come away as far as Mount Street. You see if once he removed his shoulder from beneath the British Constitution down would fall the whole massive structure and plunge millions into death and ruin, vide his speech in the House on Tuesday. It is rather a responsibility for the poor dear, isn't it ? I do hope his health will not give way beneath the strain. Fancy having to support it alone and unaided on his own dear shoulders, day after day, year after year. It is like the solar system ; the imagination reels. Samson, Hercules, and Reginald will be the three strong men of history, with long odds on Reginald. The dear devoted fellow, to think that this pillar of the Government has not

left the post of duty for thirteen years, even to come and see his wife! But au revoir, my sister. I must go really. I mustn't keep the horny-handed one waiting. He is too expensive. I pay him so much an hour to take me about, like my cook pays her guardsman."

The volatile lady, who had chattered ceaselessly from the time she entered the room to the time she left it, departed finally after a stay of half an hour, to the great relief of Mrs. Broke.

"Cocaine," murmured Mrs. Broke as the door closed upon her sister. "If poor Mary is not soon immured in a private asylum I fear she will lower the standard of the national sanity. Poor dear Charles is bad enough; but cocaine is much more deadly than whisky."

CHAPTER XVI

THE NOBLEMAN OUT OF THE NOVELETTE

NO. 17 Cromwell Villas, Hampden Road, London, N. was the kind of place that enables the passer-by to realize the meaning of the reverse of life's medal. There was nothing to recommend it from without. There was nothing to suggest why any human creature should inhabit it, except by force of need. It was situated in the heart of a neighbourhood that had not even the spirit to make a pretence of being what it was not. There was nothing in or about it to relieve its repulsiveness. Nothing could gloss over the hopelessness in which it was immersed; soap and water and the County Council had given up the attempt. It is a sardonic fancy in the architect of such dwellings to enclose a piece of earth a few square feet in extent in front of each. What purpose such an enclosure serves is hard to tell, unless it is to enable each house to stand in its own grounds. Or it may be a concession to the inveterate land-hunger of the Briton. The tenant may feel that the grimy patch is his own piece of arable, a square yard of territory off which he can peremptorily warn anybody who may presume to trespass.

Again, the architect may be one of a sombre imagination, a symbolist who would strike an analogy between these patches of sterility and the neighbourhood in which they are laid. Never are they green or fruitful. Choked with grime and refuse, they remain foul and perennially bare. Nothing that is fair can hope there to raise its head. The dog leaves its bone there; the miserable servant girl, the "slavey" of the true genus, bestrews it with ashes and fish bones, and the stalks of decomposing cabbages.

The sun, an agent of compassion in other districts, refuses to extend its beneficence to Hampden Road, London, N. The less light by which there is to view its details, the less unhappy does it appear. There are poverty, squalor, and meanness on every side. If by a remote chance the eye is arrested by an attempt to achieve something a little worthier in the shape of a whitened doorstep, an unbroken knocker, curtains reasonably clean or without an immoderate number of holes, it is at once revolted by the brutal relief in which it throws neighbouring objects. In such places the spirit of environment is ruthless, all-conquering.

No. 17 Cromwell Villas was in the middle of a row of twenty similar houses. Conceivably it might have bewildered the passer-by with its claims to distinction. There was a quite remarkable striving after something better. Its doorstep, its front parlour window, and its curtains came as near to cleanliness as the exigencies of a street permitted in which the sun itself was a ball of grime. There was also a bunch of flowers set in the window in a china cup. Beside it was the inevitable card, but instead of bearing the legend "Apartments" it said, "Miss Sparrow, Dressmaker."

Two women were seated behind this card on a bitterly cold morning in the middle of April. One was old, with hair almost white and very meagre. By careful arrangement it was made the most of. She herself was very meagre and somehow conveyed a suggestion also of being made the most of. She was very thin; her black dress was primitive and threadbare, but was not without neatness. Her face was yellow and shrivelled like a piece of parchment. It was a wholly commonplace face, transfigured with a certain harshness, the outward and visible sign of a lifelong struggle with circumstances.

If the face had ever been able to look up in the battle of life it might have been more pleasant to gaze upon. If a ray of honest sunshine, a breath of pure air could have touched it now and again; if the hourly struggle for a loaf of bread, and two ounces of tea, a roof and a bag of coals, could have been put by for a single week; if the owner of the face could have felt that life itself did not wholly depend

on those half-blind eyes, on those coarsened weary fingers, on those fragile limbs, on the eternal plying of needles and scissors from the first ray of light in the morning to the last gutter of the candle at night, her portrait might have seemed a little less out of place in a gallery of the fair, the wise, the agreeable, the well-bred.

The other woman was much younger : a girl. Like the flowers in the cracked cup in the window she had an air of being a phenomenon in Hampden Road. She also was very slight, and she was clad in black, but her dress was less primitive in style and texture than that of the elder woman, for in every line of it was the ineffable neatness of the London shop-girl.

She may have been beautiful or she may not, but her face was of a very delicate, poignant, arresting kind. And in any case she was sufficiently picturesque. It was the glamour of youth that depends on vivid colouring, the sheen of the hair, the ripe look of the lips, the freshness of the skin, the clear candour of the eyes that may even come to flower in Cromwell Villas, but doesn't stay there long. She could have sat for the picture of Youth ; and all who were not insensible to perfect simplicity and perfect innocence must have been a little thrilled by her. A year hence might prove another matter, but as yet she was absolutely fair.

The two women were talking excitedly, but at the same time both unceasingly plied needle, scissors and thread. For some little time past they had been living in the realm of faëry. A touch of true but very strange romance had entered the lives of aunt and niece. They were trying now to realize exactly what had happened. At present, however, excited, incredulous, astonished as they were, they were too bewildered to be able to do so. No matter how hard they rubbed their eyes they could not convince themselves that they were really awake. They had three tangible evidences to go upon, however. Alice had a wedding-ring on her finger, two five-pound notes in her purse, and she had given up her situation.

Aunt and niece were in a state of deliciously vague excite-

ment, like that of a child when it hears a knock upon the nursery door and is informed that it is a bear. They were rather too frightened to be wholly happy, yet they were much too happy to be really frightened. The thing itself was most exquisite matter of fact, yet it out-Family-Heralded the *Family Herald*. To them of all people, to them in their mundane sphere, to them in the unvarying monotony of their daily lives when the only adventures they had in the course of a year were the weekly ones with the landlord, King Romance had stepped directly out of his novelette, and had come ruffling it with a carol on his lips and a most beautiful insolent swagger, to No. 17 Cromwell Villas, Hampden Road.

Why he had chosen that exact number was altogether beyond them. Why had he not gone to No. 15 or No. 19, both very nice and worthy people—whatever had put it into his head to come there? If he had not been the real King Romance of whom they had read, if he had been some plausible impostor masquerading in the royal purple for an ulterior purpose, they could have understood it. Their incredulity would not have been so paralysing. Impostors are said to be common; but there is only one authentic sovereign. And why that dazzling young monarch should have chosen 17 for the magic number, no more and no less, must remain a mystery and one of the most wonderful things ever known.

“You see, my dear,” said the aunt, picking the stitches out of a bodice while her dim eyes bent lower and lower to her work; “you see, my dear, it would not have upset me so if he was not a real gentleman. Do what you will you can’t help noticing that.”

“No, auntie, you can’t,” said her niece, with a beating heart.

She was heating an iron at the fire.

“It is just that which has put me about so,” said the aunt. “When he knocked at the door and I went to open it, just as I am now, with all these bits of cotton on my dress, and there he was standing on the doorstep that I hadn’t had time to clean, and he says, ‘Miss Sparrow,’ you

could have knocked me down with a feather. Of course, my dear, you have said all along how fine he was ; and you will remember that I said that if that was so you must be all the more careful, because the finer the gentleman, the less a young girl ought to put her trust in him. The likes of them don't condescend to the likes of us except for a reason. Those were my very words. And they are my words still."

"But I am married, auntie, now," said the girl.

"You are, my dear, and that is just what makes everything so unreal. If he were not just what he is, it would be more natural. Even when you came home and spoke about him first I never thought he was one of that sort. Why, he might have been a young earl the way he stood there with his hat off and talked so grand and simple and so mannerly. I never saw any one look the part so much as he does ; and besides, if you never saw him at all you would know what he was by his beautiful voice. He can't help being a gentleman. It is born in him just as it is born in that cat to walk stately. It is not a diamond pin and a gold watch-chain with him. You can't even bring your mind to such things when he is talking to you. You don't know whether he wears them or not, and, my dear, you don't care. I could not tell you how he was dressed, although I am sure his shirt and his collar must have been ironed at one of those patent steam laundries. You could not possibly do them at home as well as that."

"No, auntie, dear, I don't suppose you could," said her niece, smiling gravely.

"Do you know, my dear," continued the older woman a little ecstatically, "he made me think of the Duke of Grandchester that the Lady Gwendolen married in that beautiful story in the *Family Herald* last week. Do you remember that it said, 'The Duke had the grand manner peculiar to dukes' ? Well, my dear, Mr. Broke put me in mind of him. I am sure the author must have copied him when he wrote that. I have never known before quite what the 'grand manner' meant ; but I think I do now. And that is why I am so afraid. I never slept at all last night for thinking of you. It all seems so much like a story ; but I have read

somewhere that truth is stranger than fiction. And so it is, my dear; so it is; if all that has happened to you is actually true!"

"Yes, yes, auntie, it is all true," said her niece eagerly. "It is all perfectly real, although it is so much like a fairy tale. Perhaps I am Cinderella and I may have a fairy god-mother. In any case here is the wedding-ring on my finger."

The girl laughed nervously but joyfully. She too was afraid; but her fear was of a kind that lent a keener edge to her wild happiness. Come what might, no one could gainsay that they were man and wife. An inviolable tie bound them together. Nothing could rob her of the emotion of strange joy that fact had given her.

"He says he will introduce you to what he calls 'his people' as soon as he can," said the aunt. "And I am not sure, dearie, that I shall not be a little easier in my mind when he has done that. He did not say much about them, but I could tell that they were very grand folks. But, of course, they must be, or *he* would not belong to them. How I should like to see his mother! What a grand lady she must be! I am sure his people, whoever they are, must be just like him. They must all be ladies and gentlemen, and very handsome and mannerly. He must have a wonderful mother; a real countess, or a duchess, or perhaps even a marchioness. For there is nothing imitation about him, is there? You can see what in others you might take to be airs come quite natural to him. And so simple as he is with it all. He must know all those grand people in the West End, but do you know, my dear, I never heard him mention them once. I wish that Mrs. West at No. 23 could see him; she never opens her mouth but out comes her uncle the vestryman. He does not make the least parade. When you get over the first shock of finding that you are talking to him, it is just as easy as it is to speak to the milkman. Why, he sat down at this very table and took a cup of tea. And would you believe, my dear, he put in his sugar with his fingers. I do wish that Mrs. West could have seen him."

Billy's wife laughed joyfully again. The simple old woman had been singing his praises in this childlike manner for two

days. There was no keeping her from the delicious topic, nor did she try, for it was poetry to them both. To every word uttered by her aunt she could subscribe. She was too much at the mercy, however, of the wild riot of happiness that sent the blood racing and tingling to her temples, and singing in her excited brain, to be able to clothe her own emotion with words. Also, she had a feeling of reticence. It hardly became one who was officially his wife to lay bare her thoughts in these unguarded terms. All the same, no praise of her husband was too extravagant for her ears; no eulogium could be passed upon him that he did not merit. He was the true chevalier without fear and without stain. She had seen a good deal more of things than her aunt, that imaginative old creature who had passed a lifetime of toil in a world peopled with the figures of her fancy, yet subject to the arbitrary conventions of her own trite point of view. Even a young girl cannot spend a year in a shop in Bond Street without being brought to view the life by which she is oppressed with wiser eyes.

This old woman had reared her orphan niece in the teeth of circumstance. She had watched her grow into a flower in whose strange beauty she had learned to take an inordinate pride. And of late when at the end of her day's labour she had turned to her story papers for an hour that, before she went to bed, she might enter the realm of faëry, she had been led to meditate a little wildly, a little wistfully upon the beauty of the girl. If only some rich gentleman in real life could be brought to see her, might he not fall in love with her! In her weekly story paper the thing was occurring constantly. Oh, if it could occur to Alice! Surely no heroine in a novel was fairer than she. The old woman believed there was not her equal in loveliness in all the world. Besides, it was coming to seem so necessary that she should be rescued from the daily round of her toil. It had become very clear to Miss Sparrow that the life of a girl in a London shop was too severe for her fragile niece. The long hours, the close confinement, the physical strain of having to stand so long behind a counter were beginning to tell upon her. You had only to glance at her to feel that

nature had not planned her for hardship. Her parents before her had been fragile too. Neither of them from the first had been destined for long days, but it was certain that toil and poverty had curtailed their lives.

Therefore when the prince out of the fairy-book, the nobleman out of the novelette, came and slipped a wedding-ring on the finger of her niece, the imaginative old woman, fearful as she might be of what the future might hold, was yet filled with exaltation. For an instant she paused in her work, and raised her half-blind eyes to peer into the exquisite face.

"I will say this, my lamb"—there was an echo of triumph in the thin voice—"Mr. Broke may be the perfect gentleman, as of course he is, but he is not an inch better than you deserve. And you will not disgrace him. He may have fine friends, but you will be able to take your place in their midst. I have brought you up carefully; you have attended a place of worship at least once every Sabbath day; you have always been a good and obedient girl in everything; and although I am your auntie and say it who ought not, when I compare your looks with those of the fine ladies whose pictures are in the illustrated paper Mr. Berry the grocer wraps the tea in, I think nobody will deny that you are more beautiful, a hundred times more beautiful than they are."

"Hush, auntie dear," said the girl, with a soft laugh. "You really mustn't say that!"

"I don't care," said the old woman vaingloriously. "It is the truth. I will say again that Mr. Broke is a very lucky young gentleman. I know I am your aunt; but if you were not my niece at all, and I had had nothing to do with your upbringing, I should say the same. If you were the niece of that Mrs. West I should not alter my opinion."

It was at this moment that the quiet street was invaded by alien sounds. There was a rattle of horses' feet, but strangely it was unaccompanied by a noise of wheels. The narrow thoroughfare, which ended in a cul-de-sac, was free of traffic as a rule; and there was something rather peculiar about this vehicle, if vehicle it was, that put it out of the

category of the tradesman's cart. Curiosity urged the girl to look out of the window.

"Oh, look, auntie!" she cried. "A carriage and pair."

No doubt it was an apparition that marked an epoch in the history of Hampden Road. Miss Sparrow could not recall an instance of such an equipage being seen in it before. Had the Queen been in the act of passing her window, the old woman could not have risen from her work more promptly or more swiftly have adjusted her spectacles.

"How splendid!" she said. "And the wheels don't make a bit of noise; and how nice those bells sound, don't they? And what stately men those two are sitting in the front, although they do look funny in their fur capes and with those shaving-brushes in their hats. They are servants, I suppose, but I am sure they must be very high class. I wonder where they are going. Why, my dear, I believe they are going to stop at Mrs. West's."

Alice could not help smiling at her aunt's enthusiasm. She was quite familiar with these vehicles; although before she went to the shop in Bond Street they would have cast a similar spell upon her.

"Why, it is stopping," cried the old woman excitedly.

"Oh, Alice, it is going to stop at Mrs. West's!"

Suddenly the girl at her elbow began to tremble violently. She was pierced by an idea which was making her gasp.

"It—it is—going to stop here!"

The older woman began to tremble also.

"Never!" she gasped.

But outside in the street the dread fact confronted them. After a little irresolution on the part of the coachman, in the course of which the footman scanned the dingy numbers of the doors on both sides of the street, the fine carriage drew up exactly in front of the magic number 17. That unassuming number had, indeed, come of late to have a strange significance in the world of faëry.

"Oh, my dear," said the aunt in a flash of terrified inspiration, "it is one of Mr. Broke's grand friends come to call upon you. Whatever shall we do!"

The mind of the young wife had travelled to that con-

clusion a full half-minute ago. The old woman and the young grew pale with anxiety. That wretched little room was no place in which to receive grand people. Too acutely were they conscious of the mean figures it and they must cut in the eyes of the occupants of a carriage and pair. But the thought uppermost in their minds, the most paralysing thought of all, was the fear they had of disgracing Mr. Broke. It did not matter much, really, what grand people thought about people like themselves; but now that Alice was actually the wife of Mr. Broke it might do him an injury with his friends if she were to be discovered in such circumstances.

"Oh, auntie!" said Alice, "will you go to the door, and—and please say I am not at home."

"No, child," said the old woman, with a certain primness striking through her agitation, "I cannot say that. It would not be true."

"Oh, but, auntie, you must, please. It is for the sake of—of my husband! His friends must not come into a room like this."

"No, no, child, I must not tell an untruth."

"Oh, but, auntie, it is—it is not really an untruth at all. It only means that—that I cannot see them."

During this dialogue between the two distressed creatures a very resolute-looking lady, with a very fine hat and a wonderful fur coat, had been seen to descend from the carriage with a little aid from the long-coated footman and a good deal from her own dignity. The two women with a thrill in their hearts had heard her ascend the steps and thump commandingly upon the decrepit knocker.

"Please, auntie, you must."

"No, child."

A second commanding thump upon the knocker.

"Oh, what can I do? She must not see me. But perhaps it is his mother. Perhaps she will not mind. I will go, auntie," said Alice resolutely.

"No, no, child," said her aunt. "It is more proper that I should answer the door. Stay here, my dear, and brush the bits of cloth off your dress, and take the needle out of

your sleeve, and find the *Family Herald*, and try to look as if you have been reading."

In the middle of these feverishly given injunctions the door received a third thump from the knocker, more commanding than any. Miss Sparrow ran in great trepidation to reply to it.

CHAPTER XVII

AN EXCURSION INTO SENTIMENT

IN less than a minute the small and mean room had been invaded by a Presence. The lady who had come in the carriage and pair was in the eyes of Miss Sparrow fitted in every way to be a friend of Mr. Broke's. Indeed, the manner of this wonderful person was as remarkable as was his. If she had come on foot and without a fur coat you would have known at once that she was a lady born and bred. And she too had the particular magic that belonged to Mr. Broke, for no sooner did she begin to talk to you than the overwhelming sense of her grandeur left you. By some occult means the fear of her went from you; and you found yourself to be conversing with her with far less trepidation than seemed possible before you had actually spoken to her.

"You have a niece," the lady had said, before Miss Sparrow had been able to make an attempt to say anything. "May I see her?"

"Yes, ma'am," Miss Sparrow had murmured in reply in a perfectly inaudible tone, and making a deep curtsy that seemed to have survived from the days when George the Third was king.

When the great lady came into the tiny room, five yards by six, she said: "Your room is delightfully cosy. May I take off my coat?"

To herself she said: "One wonders why the lower orders have such a deep-rooted horror of ventilation. One wonders how they can exist at all in such an atmosphere."

Miss Sparrow begged to be allowed to help the lady to take off her coat; and while she was engaged in so doing, her

fingers, which had passed a lifetime in the handling of inferior materials, were thrilled by the feel of the soft fur and the finest cloth that money could buy. A dressmaker as well as a poet may have the sensibility of the artist.

The old woman then made haste to provide the great lady with the best chair the room could boast : a chair with a singularly unyielding surface covered with horsehair. Seated upon this Billy's mother was able at her leisure, but not without some little personal inconvenience, to survey the person whom Billy had married. She regarded her with a perfectly frank scrutiny, a little softened by her smile.

"I think you know my son," she said. "My name is Broke."

Alice lifted her eyes rather timorously to Billy's mother and at the same moment blushed vividly.

"I understood my son to say that you were married to him on Tuesday last."

"Yes," said Alice in a faint voice.

Mrs. Broke paused to resume her scrutiny. Her first sensation had been one of displeasure. The creature was not clad in the lurid colours in which her fancy had chosen to paint her. One could hardly call her vulgar. And she could hardly be designing with a countenance of such babelike candour, of such pathetic innocence. The phantasm of the adventuress with the previous husband had already faded as completely as if it had never been. Indeed, as she continued to look upon the creature, she could almost see a reason for Billy's remarkable solicitude. She had decided in her own mind that his attitude was farcical, which the bald fact was bound to expose. But now that she had set eyes upon the object which had called it forth, she began, much against her will, to understand it.

The creature was indeed a delicate, fragile thing. To wound her would be like pulling a wing off a butterfly. The redoubtable lady sighed a little ; the faint odour of romance those matter-of-fact nostrils had scented already was decidedly annoying. She had come into squalor to look for vulgarity, and she half feared she had found something else. Looking in that shrinking face it was impossible by any

association of ideas to attribute design or motive. This strange old person, the aunt, was in her own way also evidently without blemish. Billy's mother could read in the faded eyes an extraordinary solicitude for her niece. In a grotesque and impalpable way it reminded her of the look there was in Billy's when he made her promise not to hurt her. There was a similar quixotic tenderness in the face of this old woman.

Insensibly Mrs. Broke modified her tone when she spoke next ; and the question she asked was certainly not the one she had come there to put. Had she been listening to the sound of her own voice, its inflection might have increased the sense of annoyance under which she was labouring already.

“ I suppose you are in love with my son ? ”

The girl looked at her without speaking ; a soft light as of tears trembled upon her eyelashes.

“ I suppose if you learnt that you had done him an injury—unwittingly, of course—you would be very much distressed.”

“ I could not do him an injury ; ma'am.”

“ I said unwittingly.”

“ I do not think it would be possible for me to do him an injury. I could not have a thought that would do him harm. I do not see how I could do him an injury.”

For once Mrs. Broke was at a loss to know how to press her point strictly in accordance with the rules of the game. She was under a pledge to Billy not to hurt the creature ; although, to be sure, when she made that promise her own interpretation of it was somewhat liberal. But she had to confess that now in any case it was hardly in her power wantonly to cause her pain. She was almost like a piece of gossamer, the stuff of which dreams are fashioned. A rude breath upon that fragility and it might vanish in thin air.

Indeed, this strong-willed woman of the world was afraid that she was about to make a sort of excursion into sentiment. She too, hostile as she was and must be, was already aware of the immunity conferred upon the creature by her

innocence. The wretched child had wrought their ruin with no weapon more potent than that. Really an excellent stroke of irony on the part of the Deviser of the Human Comedy! The galled woman saw all this too clearly, but yet she stayed the hand that was poised to strike. It was as though she held a tiny bird in her grasp; the slightest pressure of those powerful fingers and the last wild flutterings in that breast would be for ever still. For the first time in her life the admirable lady, who had disciplined her own daughters ruthlessly and had known how to make them suffer for the common weal, found herself choosing her phrases with a peculiar discretion, a peculiar nicety. She must take care not so much as to brush that flowerlike sensitiveness. Touch a petal of the rose and it is bruised.

"I think, child," she said, still gazing at the wife of her son, "you look rather delicate."

"Yes, ma'am, she does," interposed the aunt eagerly. "It was a long way for her to go to Bond Street to the shop. It was not convenient for her to live in, ma'am, because Perkin and Warbeck's were so short of room. Besides, Alice liked the liberty of going to and fro. Shop life is very trying for a delicate girl. She could not have kept on much longer, ma'am; it was wearing her out. But she had to go out to work to keep a roof over us, because my dressmaking business cannot provide for two. But I thank God, ma'am, that that is all over now. Mr. Broke has been so good, you don't know. Of course, she is not to go to Bond Street any more. He is taking a house for her in the country as soon as he can find one suitable. He says she wants the country air. And so she does, ma'am. If her parents before her could have had it they might have been spared many years longer than they were."

"They are both dead, I presume?"

"Her mother died the day she was born, and her father died before she was born."

"You adopted your niece, Miss Sparrow?"

"Yes, ma'am. It has been a struggle, but God has seen fit to help us. And I will say this, ma'am, from the day I buried her mother, Alice has never been anything but a joy

to me. She has never given me a moment of trouble or anxiety. She has been a perfectly good and obedient girl, and now, ma'am, she has her reward."

"I gather that the union of your niece and my son meets with your approval, Miss Sparrow."

"Oh, ma'am, it is just like a dream! I can't tell you how many times since she grew up I have prayed that Alice might marry a gentleman. The only thing that could release her from the shop was for her to become a wife. But you see, ma'am, an ordinary sort of husband would hardly have done for her. She is formed too delicate for that. Even a fine-clothes gentleman, a merely rich gentleman, would not have done for her; he had to be a gentleman by nature, ma'am, a gentleman born and bred. She is a sort of flower, ma'am, that has to be planted on the south side of a wall to get the sun and yet be screened from the wind. I have been able to do that myself in a way, not, of course, in the way I should like, but I am certain that things have not been quite so hard for her as they would have been without me. But she has been very much to me, ma'am, too. Without her I think I should have given in long ago. I am seventy-two, ma'am, and I am about done. But it doesn't matter now, you know, ma'am. I am more than content. I am very grateful. It is very kind of God to remember an old woman and make her prayers come true just as she is giving in."

Mrs. Broke thought of the familiar saying of Goethe's :

Was man in der Jugend wünscht, hat man im Alter die Fülle.

"You bring to my mind the words of a great poet," she said to the old woman. "Of that in youth one desires earnestly, in old age one shall have as much as one will."

"It is more than true, ma'am, in my case. When your son, the noblest-looking young gentleman I have ever seen, came and sat in that very chair you are sitting in now, and he said, 'Miss Sparrow, do you mind if I marry your niece?' I nearly broke down. He might have come from heaven, ma'am, for if I had the pick of all the gentlemen in the world for Alice, I think I should have chosen him. From the way

he spoke I could tell how he loved her. And as for Alice, morning, noon, and night she has no thoughts in her mind but what are caused by him."

"Miss Sparrow, I suppose you have had to work very hard at your dressmaking?" The strain the old woman had entered upon was becoming a little too much even for the stoicism of Billy's mother.

"Yes, ma'am, I have." The old woman hesitated a little. "Yes, ma'am, I have been a worker; 'an old struggler,' as the old woman said to the great Doctor Johnson. Not, you know, ma'am, that it is the actual work that grinds you down. It is the fear. It makes the blood run cold in your heart when you realize what must happen if you can't find the six-and-sixpence every Friday for the landlord. It may sound boastful, to you, ma'am, but in all the forty-two years I have lived in this house, I have never had to ask for a day longer in which to pay the rent. But that is only one thing, although the most important. There's rates and taxes, and you can't do without food and coal. Then sometimes you want clothes too; and there are all manner of other expenses. You see, ma'am, strive as you may at dressmaking, you can hardly ever put by more than a few pence a week for a rainy day. And for the last few years my eyesight has been failing. And then you always have the fear as you grow old that you may lose your customers. But that is one of the thoughts you have to put away."

"May I ask how my son first became acquainted with your niece?"

Again had Billy's mother felt the need for a change of theme.

"He first saw her at Perkin and Warbeck's shop, ma'am. I think he got to know her by coming in to buy things. But it was not until he bought a pair of lady's gloves from her and asked her to accept them, that she spoke of him to me. Of course, ma'am, I had always told her never to take a present from any gentleman, not even a bunch of violets. You may have daughters of your own, ma'am, but even if you have you must forgive me for saying that I don't suppose you have any idea how careful poor girls working in public

for their living have to be. It is almost a curse if they are born good-looking. There are two kinds of gentlemen, ma'am, just as there are two kinds of most things.

"Well, from that time, ma'am, he was always paying her little attentions, so that no matter what warnings I gave her she began to think of nothing else but Mr. Broke. I nearly went down on my knees to her to beg her to be careful. She was a very good girl, and I could see how hard she tried to heed my warnings not to think about him. But, oh, ma'am! no matter what she did, Mr. Broke had her in his power. If he had not been the right kind of gentleman I hardly dare to think what might have happened. You may have daughters of your own, ma'am, as I say; and you may have seen a girl in love against her will. It is very terrible. We both used to cry together about it in the evenings when she got home, and we used to pray together; but the time soon came when I saw that he had got her completely in his power. She could not help herself; it was like what you might call fate. Then he took to writing to her, and she used to go almost wild. She would hardly allow his letters to go out of her hands; and she always carried them in her pocket to and from the shop.

"And I will confess it to you now, ma'am, that it was a torture to me all the time. I had never seen this Mr. Broke; and you must forgive me for saying it, ma'am, I did not believe in him. Gentlemen who write their letters on that sort of note-paper don't mean any good as a general rule to the likes of us. But I misjudged him, ma'am, and if the gratitude of an old and poor woman is worth anything, and I don't suppose it is, from my heart I give it, ma'am, to your son, Mr. Broke. I honour him, ma'am; I think of him with reverence, because for a gentleman of his position it comes so easy to act dishonourable. I say what I know, ma'am, because when I was about the age of Alice, or perhaps a little older, I too—I—only in my case—only——!"

The old woman stopped abruptly. A faint tinge of colour crept into her face and she trembled violently. In the same moment her eyes filled slowly with tears. A disconcerting silence ensued in which the furrowed features relaxed. It

was for an instant only, however; her face almost immediately resumed the expression which a hard and joyless life had given it.

“I—I am talking to you, ma’am, as I don’t think I have ever talked to any one before. You are, as I say, Mr. Broke’s mother; and being that I know I can trust and respect you. But perhaps nobody ever will know but God and my own heart what the reason is that I honour and respect your son so much.”

Mrs. Broke rose and took up her coat. Her interview had proved a more painful business than she had anticipated. Every topic chosen by this old woman imbued her with a feeling of discomfort.

As Mrs. Broke rose to go the young girl came from her place behind the table where she had been standing as far as possible from her husband’s mother, and made a timid offer to help her to put on her coat. As she did so Mrs. Broke gazed pensively at the feats of colour embodied in the bright hair and delicate skin of this new member of her family, which the slightly flushed appearance of her cheeks seemed to enhance. She saw the fragile grace of the slender limbs; the quick little motions by which they expressed a fawnlike timidity; moreover, she beheld the air of tacit appeal, as of childhood throwing itself upon the mercy of maturity, with which she came forward to confront the mother of her husband.

Mrs. Broke accepted in silence the service of holding the fur coat and of deftly inserting her matronly form within it. Without speaking, the august woman continued to regard her daughter-in-law for some little time after she was prepared to depart. This creature had ruined Billy; had probably ruined them all; and her real motive in penetrating that morning into this substratum of squalor was to bring the fact home to her. Curiosity had been the pretext she had given even to herself; but deep down in that feminine heart lurked the spirit of revenge. If the creature really did love her son, as the wretched fellow in his infatuation insisted that she did, she would know how to deal with such an act of presumption. But as the galled woman continued to

look upon this child no thought of retaliation was there to sully her.

At last she moved to the door of the little room. Suddenly, however, she returned and kissed Alice gravely.

"I think," she said, "you ought to get away from this horrid London as soon as you can. I have been thinking out a little plan. There is a tiny cottage near where I live; it is quite pretty and on the top of a hill. Perhaps I can find a few small pieces of furniture to put in it; but you must give me a fortnight to have it painted and whitewashed, and then you must come at once; and your aunt must come too. There must be no more dressmaking; no more payments of six-and-sixpence every Friday to the landlord. You will be wise, I think, to sell your furniture. The cost of taking it to your new home will probably exceed its value; but of course I do not mean that if there are things particularly dear to you, you are not to bring them. Do so by all means. Now here is another five pounds to banish that dreadful dressmaking. And if you want some more money to help you to move you will please write to me, will you not? Here is a card with my address upon it.

"Good-bye now. I will write to tell you the day upon which your cottage will be ready. It has honeysuckle and clematis running all over it, and a little garden in front full of flowers and fruit; and there is a wood on the side of the hill behind, in which in the spring and summer the birds sing all day and half the night as well. I feel sure it will enchant you. Good-bye; and do not fail to let me know the day upon which I may expect you. You must take a ticket for Cuttisham at Paddington station and you shall be met on arrival."

Shaking hands with Miss Sparrow rather less perfunctorily than was her wont, Lady Bountiful escaped the scene of gratitude she felt to be brewing by a swift retreat through the evil-smelling passage into the street.

Her appearance there was a great relief to her sister's horses, who had been pacing up and down the thoroughfare for more than an hour. The relief to her sister's servants was even greater. Those serious gentlemen were inclined

to believe that Mrs. Broke had been murdered in that evil-looking house. When their mistress went slumming never by any chance did she stay longer than three minutes in any particular abode. And even then she did not go alone, and it was always arranged that the police should be in the neighbourhood.

As the carriage of Mr. Broke's mother glided out of the squalid street, aunt and niece were locked in one another's arms, faint with tears.

CHAPTER XVIII

LADY BOUNTIFUL AND A YOUNG INTELLECTUAL

MRS. BROKE had been shaken to the foundations of her belief. For the first time her lines had been cast among the Poor. She was in the habit of playing the part of Lady Bountiful to the labouring class in her own village, and had found the occupation pastoral. But Hampden Road was different. The glimpse it had afforded of the uncharted wastes of a great city had a little amazed, a little overwhelmed her.

Emphatically she was a person belonging to her own class. She saw with their eyes, heard with their ears, understood with their understanding. She had taken it for granted, in a bland and not too definite manner, that the denizens of Hampden Road who were written down as so many millions in the statistics of the population, enjoyed an existence in some remote and alien latitude. They were certainly known to exist, because there was a column of police intelligence in *The Times* every morning, ornaments of her sex were known to be conducting researches into the subject, and anthropologists referred to them in books. One assumed they were akin to the Fijians. The Fijians were a coloured people living in the Tropics; the Poor were a dirty people living in Unpleasantness. The Fijians owed their savagery to their nakedness and their colour to the heat of the sun. The Poor owed their poverty to their inherent viciousness, and their squalor to a process of natural selection.

On going forth to those unexplored regions she did not expect to be confronted with a pair of intensely human

specimens clinched in a death struggle with a monster that was pressing out their lives. But the whole thing had been so vivid that she could not deny its claim to rank as a page of experience.

More than once on her way back to her own impoverished family Mrs. Broke shuddered when her mind reverted to the grim significance of six-and-sixpence every Friday for the landlord. They were poor themselves; indeed of late they had come to look on their own poverty as rather bitter. But now she had seen the two women in Hampden Road her views were suffering a change. It was as though she and her kindred belonged to a sort of superhuman caste, which moved upon an altogether different plane of being. The very things they regarded as vital did not exist at all for the denizens of Hampden Road. It was a little bewildering that two races of human beings, sprung from a common Maker and a common soil, should grow up side by side and yet have these elemental differences.

Mrs. Broke went back to her husband and children in the country with her thoughts in a measure diverted from the wreck of their fortunes. It seemed cynical for the moment to view Billy's marriage in such a light now that she had been made to feel what it meant to the other party to the contract. When she drove out of Cuttisham into the bare and wind-bitten lanes it was good to breathe again the pure and shrewd airs of the country-side after the mephitic vapours of London. At that moment her one desire was never again to breathe the nauseating atmosphere of Hampden Road. She wanted to shut it out of her mind forever.

It was about the hour of luncheon that Mrs. Broke turned in at the lodge gates of Covenden. On her way to the house she encountered a solitary individual walking towards her. It was Delia's tutor. Since the day on which he had taken up his duties the young man had received no second invitation to eat at her table.

The sight of the rather insignificant figure touched a chord in her. To-day, for the first time in her life, she was troubled with a faint misgiving as to the infallibility of her judgment. Three days ago she would have lent no countenance to the

suggestion that her beautifully balanced mind could lead her astray. Her experience was too profound, her knowledge too wide. Did they not render her invulnerable to error? This morning, however, she was not so sure.

There came into her mind a curious analogy between the man walking towards her with his eyes bent on the ground and the two women she had lately seen in Hampden Road, London, N. His slightness, his paleness, his self-effacing air, all ministered to the comparison. Thoughts of an uncomfortable intimacy sprang loose in her. Somewhat insolently they began to draw a comparison between his lot and her own.

She had had a comfortable brougham and a fleet pair of horses to bear her the four miles from Cuttisham. This young man, moving in his humbler plane, would have to be borne the same four miles on the soles of his feet. In ten minutes she would be sitting down to a solid meal; this young man, if he pursued a diligent course, might hope to follow her example in something under an hour and a quarter. In his case, however, the nature of the meal might prove less satisfying. He had already walked four miles that morning, and had spent several hours since in an exacting form of labour. She, on the other hand, began the duties of her day when she drank a cup of tea in bed at a quarter to eight. She had submitted to be dressed by somebody else about an hour later; had had breakfast at half-past nine; had spent the remainder of the morning in a little gossip, a little shopping, in driving to the station, and in occupation of the cushions of a first-class compartment.

It is true that this picture of their divergent lots was a little over-coloured. But that was essential; a trick of the impertinent person, the artist. Without a measure of judicious exaggeration no picture can count on its appeal. A parallel less graphic and the humane lady would not now have been in the act of demanding of herself the reason why this man could not have received the courtesy at her hands of being allowed to sit at her table every time he came to her house.

When the young man came near, and took his eyes from

the ground and looked at her vaguely, with a faintly perceptible doubt as to whether she would choose to honour him with a bow, Mrs. Broke stopped her carriage. She beckoned to him to come to her.

“Good morning, Mr. Porter. Will you not return to luncheon?”

The young man seemed a little startled.

“Oh, thank you,” he said, as though his mind were elsewhere, “but I don’t think—I don’t think I need any.”

“But surely—after having walked so far and having had such a tiresome morning?”

The young man smiled.

“Oh, thank you, but I am able to do three things at the same time. I eat, I walk, I contemplate.”

With a laugh that was quite pleasant he exhibited a small packet of white tissue paper.

Mrs. Broke smiled her smile of slow dazzlement.

“You are indeed a man of resources,” she said archly. “But if you do not return with me to-day I shall think you are angry with me. You have been coming out here for more than a month, and yet my unpardonable stupidity has driven you to these expedients. But, really, I must blame you a little also. You ought to have stayed to luncheon every day as a matter of course. Promise me you will never, never wait again for an invitation. Get in, please, and say you forgive me.”

In the face of such a humble and charming insistence, Mr. Porter was fain to get in and say he did forgive the mellifluous lady. He sat opposite to her in a corner of the brougham and she prattled to him dulcetly.

At the luncheon table the family was in full assembly. Mrs. Broke having embraced everybody in a gracious bow, took her usual seat at the end of the table and placed the guest on her right hand. And there was a fortunate aspect to her hardly agreeable preoccupation with the young man. His presence, under her wing, freed her for the time being from embarrassing questions as to the nature of the business that had summoned her to London so suddenly.

"I wish you would tell me a little about your work, Mr. Porter," she said, with her least elaborate air. "That is if you don't mind talking about it."

"I don't know anything I *can* tell you, that is anything that is of interest," said the young man, with a touch of shyness that somehow saved him from the charge of false modesty.

"I am sure you are a man of ambition."

"Yes—at least I hope I am."

The skilled tactician had touched a chord, it seemed.

"The ambition I am sure of all generous hearts—to leave the world a little better than one finds it."

The young man coloured with pleasure. The caressing quality of the charming voice made an effect of music in a mind so delicately attuned.

"Oh, yes, but how terribly difficult it must be to do that."

"Who was it who said that difficulty is the true elixir of life?"

"I don't know," said the young man simply. "But it seems a fine saying."

"You find your own work very difficult, I am sure, and I am sure you regard it very seriously?"

"I will not pretend that I have ever found it easy," said the young man, "nor do I find it easy to describe. Unless another feels about it almost exactly as one feels about it oneself, perhaps it were wiser not to attempt the task."

Lady Bountiful's tone grew a shade more firm.

"I do not wonder," she said, with so perfect an inflection of humility that it could only have sounded another note in the most educated ear, "that you should—shall we say distrust?—such feeble attempts to ascend to your own plane. I suppose it is quite true that as a sex we are apt to overrate our mental powers."

"I wasn't thinking of that," said the young man, with a simplicity that disarmed her. "I wasn't thinking of the power of your intellect, but simply of its emotional character. Our minds are not—are not set in the same key."

"May I confess myself a little mystified?"

“It is simply that we don't see things in quite the same way.”

“My mystification increases.”

“Please do not think I underrate your mental power. But I think you read books for what you can take from them; you don't read them for what you can bring to them.”

“Surely a paradoxical saying?”

“Paradox is only truth walking backwards. But I have not expressed myself very clearly. I wanted to suggest that every mind does not go to a book in quest of the hard fact.”

“But surely one goes to a book for the acquisition of knowledge.”

“Or for an adventure of the soul.”

“A question of terms, is it not?”

“You must please forgive me if I don't agree. The greatest of books are written in cypher; they cannot be read at all without a key. And the key is your immortal soul and mine.”

By the exercise of those subtle arts of which she was mistress she was already beginning to surprise this shy soul into self-expression. Perhaps the operation was a little malicious. At any rate it amused her “to draw him out.” When it came to bed-rock her mind was hard, and from the first it had been instinctively hostile to “the young intellectual.”

“Mr. Porter, you are a poet?”

The young man shook his head rather sadly.

“Alas! there are no wings to my Pegasus. He cannot soar. The empyrean is not for him.”

“At any rate you practise the art of writing?”

“After my fashion.”

“Tell me what great end you have in view.”

Quite suddenly the face of the young man was suffused with light.

“I think I would be like Francis Bacon,” he said. “I think I would take all knowledge to be my province. But this is vain. I am afraid I am a little flushed with my first victory.”

“ Ah ! ”—the charming voice was irresistible—“ do tell me of that.”

The question seemed to touch the young man as with fire. In a gush of words he described how he had conceived certain abstract speculations upon truth, how he had embodied them after months of joyous interminable labour in an essay which had been printed in the *International Review*, how he had received an offer of a post on the staff of that famous journal, and how to the offer was attached a princely salary for one of his way of life.

“ Of course, Mr. Porter, you declined the offer with scorn ? ”

“ Oh, no ; I assure you it has been accepted with gratitude.”

“ That is very singular, is it not ? One has always understood that the true artist despises the sordid pounds and shillings.”

“ Not if he has been through the mill, I think.”

“ Have you been through the mill, Mr. Porter, if the question is a fair one ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Pray tell me—this is most thrilling ! You interest me painfully.”

“ There is so little to tell.”

All at once the young man had grown wary. In place of the sudden fire which in spite of Mrs. Broke's sense of her own tacit hostility had amused and charmed her, a barrier of impenetrable reserve was between them now.

She was quick to tack.

“ I suppose now you have accepted this suggestion of the editor's you will turn your face towards the Mecca of the man of letters ? ”

“ I am engaged to take up my duties in London in a month's time. I am glad to have had this opportunity of talking to you, since after then, I fear, it will no longer be possible for me to coach Miss Delia. I have written to Lady Bosket to say so.”

“ I am sure it will be a misfortune for the child, although she has had the privilege of receiving a certain amount of your instruction. I am afraid you found her hopeless.”

“On the contrary, I could not have wished for an apter pupil.”

“This is praise indeed.”

“I’ll confess that Miss Delia has interested me enormously. She is the first of her sex whom I have come to know at all intimately, and it has been an experience. Besides, I have a feeling—you must please forgive it—that people may be a little inclined to underrate her. She does not deserve to be underrated; her sympathies are so quick, so remarkable.”

“I am so glad. One had nearly made up one’s mind that the child was wholly devoid of intelligence.”

“It is painful to hear you say that. The graces of her mind may not be set forth for all to read, but may they not be the more exquisite on that very account? In strong, wise, and judicious hands hers might prove a very noble life. But”—the voice of Delia’s tutor had sunk in the oddest manner—“I confess that I tremble for her.”

“One had not guessed that the child’s nature would make these demands,” said Mrs. Broke lightly. “I tremble for her myself.”

So absorbed had these two alien persons been in their conversation that they had already long outstayed everybody at the luncheon table. Mrs. Broke was not without a sense of slightly malicious pleasure. The young man might tacitly despise her intellect, but she knew how to toy with his a little. Her art, masquerading in the livery of a ready sympathy, had broken down much of his reserve. She had made him talk. At the same time he had interested her keenly.

When at last they went to the drawing-room the redoubtable lady was in better heart than she had been all that day. Her talk with the young man seemed to have restored her. She had a sense of exhilaration. Here was a man out of the common. She was glad to have spent an hour in talk with him. He had an uplifting vigour like a breeze from the mountains.

As a manifestation of this new interest he had aroused in her, she asked the young man presently whether he had seen the remains of the old hall, in an outlying corner of the park.

They were said to have an antiquarian value. He had not, but would very much like to do so. Delia was thereupon summoned, and it was suggested that she should take her tutor to see the ruin. They were soon on their way.

“It is long since one was so arrested by a personality,” was Mrs. Broke’s mental comment when they had gone. “There is a good deal in that young man.”

Suddenly the wise lady laughed, perhaps even a little uncomfortably. A fantastic thought had crept into that sagacious mind.

Was it not a little foolhardy, was it not almost like courting a second disaster, to throw the child into the company of such a firebrand?

The idea was not to be treated seriously; but all the same, so inveterate was her habit of wisdom, that she was by no means sure that she would have proposed this expedition had it occurred to her sooner.

CHAPTER XIX

TWO ON A TOWER

FOOTING it over the young and green grass of spring Delia and her tutor were not long in crossing the ravine and in pressing up the steep hill on which was set all that remained of the former stronghold of this ancient race of Broke. It was noteworthy that this old hall or castle had this in common with other great houses of antiquity: its architect had chosen one of the fair spots of earth on which to set it.

It stood on a grass-grown plateau, and was like a sentinel in the view of the miles upon miles of rich pasture land that stretched away beneath. The lush meadows, fat with increase, drowsed below. A clear stream, glorious in the sunlight, meandered from little copse to little copse, in which the spring birds sang. The steeples of churches in neighbouring villages were remotely visible, "bosomed high in tufted trees." All things seemed to minister to the uncommon wisdom which had chosen for a hermitage this fair place.

"Ah, those old builders, what a cunning they had!" said the young man as he toiled up to a piece of crumbling masonry over which the bracken had grown. "They only chose the places fit to receive of their best. It is not easy to get here, but once on these heights one is more than repaid. You come of a favoured race, Miss Broke. Who can conceive a thing more delightful than to have an enchanted castle, as I am sure this must have been, to dwell in for a thousand years?"

"I do not think we have been any happier because of it," said Delia. "It has made no difference to us as far as I can see."

“One would have expected it to breed a race of poets and seers, grave worshippers of nature, and those who have never slept in their endeavours to surprise her secrets.”

“Instead of which,” said Delia, who long ago had learned to talk with him in terms of an ampler equality than when she had known him first, “it seems to have bred a race whose highest pleasure is to destroy her work. If as a race we have been at all distinguished it has been as soldiers and hunters—savage men who have had a passion for killing every living thing.”

“A severe indictment.”

He caught himself musing on her strange air of vehemence.

“I should not have found myself making it a month ago,” said Delia, half to herself and hardly intending that he should hear.

Looking back on that short period which yet seemed so long a space, and in a measure so fraught with destiny, she guessed how great was the change in herself. She had developed by inordinate strides. She was a child then, a little timid thing peeping out of the door of the nursery; she was now a woman feeling the first premonitory stiflings of the world upon her heart. It was not quite so easy to breathe God’s air as it had been a month ago.

To-day there could be no doubt she was unhappy. She was too simple to disguise the fact that her friend’s announcement of his going away to London filled her with a sense of impending loss. From the first morning of his coming she had never been quite the same. There was in him that touch of mystery that was so haunting, that personal glamour which seems to cast a spell. It was not attraction, not fascination altogether; it was a stranger, more magical quality.

Not again had she wept because she could not go hunting since that first memorable morning of his coming, when he had wrung her small secrets out of her, and caused her to burn her treasures. She knew that long ago she had learned to recognize his footfall. She also knew that if she caught the tones of his voice at a moment when they were un-

expected she was thrilled in a manner she had never been conscious of before. These were slight things, but in the present unquietness of her heart they had the power to make her unhappy. Were they not signs that she was journeying perilously into that mysterious country from whose bourne no traveller returns unscarred?

Unconsciously the days of his coming had grown to be underlined in her heart. Those days on which he did not come were soulless, incomplete. On those days there seemed no particular reason why she should ever get out of bed in the morning and go through the tedious business of putting on her clothes. Even hunting had begun to lose its hold upon her. It took on the same drab hues as the rest of life's diurnal affairs when her friend did not walk out from Cuttisham to bewilder and enchant her.

He seemed to move on a higher plane than the rest of her little world. He seemed to carry a special atmosphere about with him. Under the shy diffidence of his manner he was very certain of himself, perfectly assured in all he said and did. He did not appear to know what vacillation meant; and it was impossible to deny a secret to those gravely humorous eyes. Tender eyes they were too. There were things that could melt them and give them a look she had learned to watch for. They were not given to passion. But sometimes at rare moments a kind of liquid fire ran in them which thrilled her own soul into flame.

Time and again had she been obliged to state to herself that he was a much more complex kind of being than the only other men with whom she was familiar, her father, her brother, and her Uncle Charles. There seemed to be finer shades of meaning in him; he seemed to have a more developed life. There was constant occupation in trying to fathom what was implied by his strange personality. When she looked at her father at the breakfast-table there he was as plain as his newspaper; if she glanced at her mother and sisters it was easy to tell exactly who and what they were. It was only since she had come to know this man that she had been prone to these speculations. Somehow she felt that such behaviour was weak and unworthy, but

do what she would, she was thinking continually of this new and mysterious friend.

Her companion sat down on a fragment of ruined wall, and took off his hat. There was sweat on his forehead. He made no secret of the fact that the ascent had taxed him a little. He laughed at his plight, particularly as Delia was far from sharing it. She looked as cool as a young fawn that has merely leaped over a brook.

"This is where you athletes have the pull of a bookworm," he said. "You don't seem to breathe at all and you move like a bird."

"I didn't think such a little climb would distress you," said Delia. "We ought not to have come up so fast. I am so sorry."

"It's odd," he said, "how any little physical inferiority seems to hurt. I hate to be sitting like this while you don't seem to be a penny the worse. I think I must go into training, as you athletes would say, although walking out here from Cuttisham three times a week has done me a lot of good. But I am afraid I have a rooted dislike to physical exertion."

"How strange!" said Delia, "when perfect fitness is such a joy. It is better than anything I know to feel oneself equal to anything. I hope you don't despise the out-of-doors person."

"On the contrary, I admire them immensely—their health, their strength, their wonderful nerve. Still, I'll not deny that they also ruffle my temper a bit, for I simply hate having to admit my inferiority to any human being."

"Arrogance," said Delia, with a wise little shake of the head.

"I agree, I agree!"

"I don't think I should ever accuse you of arrogance really," said Delia, determined to wipe this speck of dust off her idol.

"You would be wrong," said her friend, enjoying her sudden descent into the serious. "It is the besetting sin of the tribe. We egotists never hesitate to pit ourselves in a comparison with others, and when we draw it, it is not to

their advantage, I can assure you. If Such-a-one can do a certain thing, I can do it, is what we say. It is wrong, it is deplorable, but—but *il y a les défauts de nos qualités.*”

“I am sure you could do anything you made up your mind to do,” said Delia gently.

“Please, please, don’t make me vainer than I am already,” he said.

But her earnestness flattered even more than it amused him.

It was during the next moment that Delia had an inspiration. There was a hazardous feat connected with this ruin which she and her sisters were never weary of attempting. The ruin itself consisted of a single fragment of wall some twenty feet high. A narrow and dangerous parapet formed the top of it; and at the extreme end the crumbling remains of what had once been a hunting-tower rose sheer to the sky, eighty feet at least from the top of the wall and a hundred feet from the bank of green earth on which they were now standing. Seen from this spot it looked a most insecure and dizzy height. Only the ivy with which it was clad seemed to hold it together. The tower itself was so bat-ridden and far gone in decay that its mere retention of the power to keep itself upright seemed an open defiance of the law of gravity.

So often had Delia and her sisters made the comparatively easy ascent of the lower wall itself, and so often had they walked the coping that ran along the top as far as the base of the tower, that they could now perform the feat with the certainty of a tight-rope walker crossing a chasm. To the uninitiated it had a delicious appearance of daring, but they had practised the trick so often that it had become as simple as the act of springing into a saddle out of the hand of their father.

The hunting-tower itself, however, was a different matter. Times without number had they set out to reach the weird emblem in the form of a cross that stood at the top, on a quaint little platform. Not one of them, however, had ever succeeded in making her foothold sufficiently good in that decrepit masonry covered with ivy and moss, which was its only staircase, to scale the full eighty feet of this crazy,

wind-shaken object. She who accomplished that hazardous task would be held in everlasting honour by her sisters. Up till now it was the indomitable Joan who had touched the highest point. Fitted physically no better than the others to enjoy the distinction, she yet contrived to do so by sheer force of character. The point she had touched was several feet higher than that achieved by even the fearless Philippa.

It hardly admitted of question that the plight in which her friend was displayed gave Delia the idea. In mind she felt herself to be his inferior to a cruel degree. But physically it was otherwise. There was one point at least on which she would not have to yield to his distressing superiority. The desire to make the most of that advantage was eminently feminine, nor was it less so that she should aspire to shine in the eyes of one who in his own person combined all the Christian virtues. He had told her that feats of athletic skill aroused his envy. Would it not be fine to excite it by a daring he could not hope to emulate!

With creatures of impulse thought is action. The idea in her mind, it would not allow her to reflect. In a moment, with a joyous, defiant, carolling little laugh she ran to the wall, and before the unsuspecting young man had time to observe, her birdlike feet were scrambling up stone by stone through the moss and crannies. By the time he had risen from his place on the bank to see what she was doing, she was already on the parapet of the wall above his head.

“ I say, I say ! What are you doing ! ”

Her wild feet were in motion already along the narrow coping. Gaily, exquisitely supple of poise, she glided across as one who exults in unconsciousness of peril. It was superb ; but the startled witness felt already a shock of bewilderment.

“ I say, I say, Miss Broke, what *are* you doing ! ”

Miss Broke turned an apple-blossom cheek over her shoulder and proceeded to look down upon her friend with an arch laugh lurking in the corners of her lips. The notes of his alarm, floating up from below, were as music in her ears.

“ You must come down, you know. It isn't safe, I am sure it isn't safe ! ”

She paid no heed. The madness that had come upon her was increased by his anxiety. Amid trills of laughter her winged feet bore her along the wall. Short skirts and bright stockings twinkled about the slender ankles like the motions of a gay-breasted bird falling and rocketing. The fair curves swayed in the sunlight. Once she made a wicked pretence of missing her foothold, and as the heart of the spectator leaped in dismay, she swung round on her audacious heels, and met his eyes with a face as frankly mischievous as ever emblazoned the vaunting spirit of woman. She looked as tantalizing as a squirrel, as bold as a robin, as sure-footed as a chamois leaping along the face of the Alps.

Before he could guess what she meant to do, she had reached the base of the hunting-tower at the far end of the wall. At once the clever feet began to climb that sheer pinnacle. In vain did he call to her, now in tones of horror. She did not stop, nor hesitate, nor once glance back. The madness that had taken her had intensified its grip.

It was wonderful that she was able to find so many holds for her toes along the sheer front of masonry. The ivy crumpled, and now and then gave way under her hands ; the dust was shaken out of the moss ; bats flopped about in the upper air ; the very crazy old tower itself appeared to sway. Up and up went the mad thing, not hearing now the entreaties, the commands from below. The horrified witness began to lose his self-control.

"Oh, stop, stop, stop!" he shouted.

Nothing, however, could check that ascent. Grasping the tenacious wild growths, and tucking her toes in the invisible niches where the mortar had crumbled from between the stones, she went hand above hand, up and up.

So wild her attack on that sheer surface, and such the speed with which she had drawn herself up, that now she swung a truly perilous height from the earth, more than two-thirds of the way towards the platform at the top. And it may have been that the young man's terror-stricken tones came to her now, for here it was that for the first time she paused. She paused an instant to look back. In that instant she was lost.

Swinging in mid-air between earth and sky, the impulse that had carried her so far left her as suddenly as it came. The power to move one way or the other wholly deserted her in that brief but fatal moment of her looking back. She had no longer the volition for the upward course ; and the knowledge she now had of an abyss yawning underneath, completely paralysed her will. She hung in the wind, like a leaf, impotent, fluttering, some seventy feet in mid-air.

It needed not her white face, nor the faint cry that reached him, to tell Porter what had occurred. As she hung swaying outwards into space it seemed that any moment she would grow too faint to keep her hold and that she would be cast dead at his feet. Porter was no athlete, but he had a clear, strong intelligence. And this terrible danger seemed to translate him. He cried to her in a loud, confident tone of reassurance :

“ Hold on a minute, and I will come to you.”

That was the beginning of a struggle between life and death. The first fact that penetrated Porter's mind was that to reach the tower direct from the mound of earth on which he stood was impossible. He must go to the farther end of the wall, where the climb to the parapet was not difficult for an active man. Porter could not claim to be that, but under the goad of fear he clambered up to the top of the wall without delay. Once there he had to go along the narrow, and, to him, unnerving coping that led to the base of the tower. He could not trust himself to walk upright across it, therefore he went down on all-fours, and made his way upon his hands and knees. This mode was much the surer, although it cut the palms of his hands and pierced the knees of his trousers.

The wretched girl was still clinging half-senseless to the side of the tower by the time Porter found himself beneath it. She hung now some fifty feet above him ; he had the peculiar physical awkwardness that nature inflicts upon the thinker ; the innate physical cowardice and shrinking from danger which is often the penalty of the gift of imagination ; his heart beat cruelly ; his breast rose and fell in the painful effort to get breath ; the sweat leapt out of every pore ; his

limbs were as paper ; and yet if the girl was not to be dashed lifeless to the ground without his lifting a finger to save her, he would be compelled to swing his leaden bulk into space and ascend the sheer face of the tower.

He did not hesitate. Involuntarily he realized the grim significance of the adage, " He who hesitates is lost." An instant for reflection ; an instant for reason to approve, for common sense to sanction, and his effort would not be made. A moment's dalliance while he considered his grievous physical limitations in their relation to this hopeless and appalling task and Delia would be lying dead on the ground.

With all the force of his will he surrendered himself to a single idea. If she, a child, can climb up there, I, Alfred Porter, can climb there also.

Even in the moment the young man made his resolve he knew that his labouring flesh was as water ; but the indomitable will was stronger in him than the clay. He forced himself to rise from his bleeding knees and hands, attacked the crevices before him with his toes, and made a convulsive clutch at the ivy above his head. Mechanically he began to draw his body up the cliff-like surface, precisely in the fashion which less than five minutes ago had been revealed to him while the blood ran cold in his veins. He would have had no idea of the manner in which to attempt the climb had the means been left to his own ingenuity. But having seen Delia gripping with her fingers and thrusting at the crevices with her feet, by force of imitation he found himself doing the same. At once he found his toes slipping into concealed nooks, capable of giving footholds, and his hands cleaving to roots strong enough to support his weight. It was then borne in upon him that he was ascending into space with surprising rapidity and miraculous ease. It seemed hardly more difficult than climbing a ladder. Like many another act of daring, it was the inception that made the supreme demand.

His first steps had been involuntary. But finding himself borne onwards and upwards so lightly, so easily, a rare exhilaration suddenly took hold of him. For the first time in his life he felt the sporting instinct bracing heart and nerves,

And with it came that intrepid *insouciance* which is the hallmark and the birthright of the born sportsman, which raises him to a higher power in the crises of the games he happens to be playing: the leader of cavalry recovering the guns; the fox-hunter taking his own line in a quick thing across a big country; the three-quarter back in Rugby football scoring the winning try on the stroke of the clock. His body worked automatically; his whole being was in the thrall of one idea. A pair of helpless feet were in a niche far above his head. He must get them in his hands or die.

Moving upwards through space he was conscious of nothing but that. Danger and fear did not exist. Flesh and blood, sunlight and green fields did not exist. Time there was not, nor place. At last he was up to her; he was touching the hem of her skirt. Releasing one hand from the ivy, he encircled her tightly with his unencumbered arm. He became superhuman as he did so. Suddenly he was endowed with a strength far beyond his own. Hoarsely he told her to fold her arms round his throat. She obeyed with two slender throbbing wrists as cold as stone.

How they got down alive neither of them could ever say. Afterwards they could only point to the fact that they lived to tell the tale. The descent was simply miraculous, but that was a moment when the young man possessed miraculous qualities. He carried the talisman in his spirit that performs the marvels of which we read. Those who have this faculty of submission seldom fail. He was surrendered wholly to the gods of his enormous resolution, and step by step they brought him and his burden in safety to the coping of the wall.

"I am all right now, I can walk now," said Delia faintly, the moment her feet touched solid bricks and mortar.

He allowed her to slide off his shoulders on to it.

As soon as she was on firm ground she was able to pull herself together. Soon she had made her practised way along the coping to the far end of the wall where the descent to mother earth was easiest. He laboured after her in the decidedly less dignified and less comfortable fashion in which he had crossed it before.

When the green earth at last received them again, Porter's first act was to prostrate himself at full length and bury his face in the grass. For about a minute he lay mute and panting, and then began to shake hysterically. Directly afterwards the agitated Delia bending over him was terrified to find he was insensible. She pulled him by the shoulder, but he gave no sign. She called his name, but he made no answer. She knelt down at his side and tried to raise him up, but putting forth all her strength she could not move him. Great was her alarm, but she managed to retain her presence of mind. She remembered that a clear stream of water ran over stones at the bottom of the hill. Running down to it as fast as she could, she took off her straw hat and filled the crown of it with water. To return with it up the hill was not easy, but in quite a short time she was back at his side, without having spilled a drop of the precious liquor.

To her immense relief she discovered him to be sitting up with his head resting against the wall. His face was deadly, and it was curiously distorted.

He gasped at the sight of her bearing the hat full of water gravely in front of her. His lips moved in thanks, but he was unable to utter them.

She gave him the water and he drank greedily.

He drew a deep breath. He was shaking all over. His face was so convulsed that Delia could not bear to look at it.

"Can you ever forgive me?" she said at last.

She was dreadfully frightened.

Again he tried to speak, but could only make a strange noise in his throat.

"You *will* forgive me," said Delia, kneeling beside him.

Some instinct urged her to sprinkle what remained of the water on his face.

"We are both alive." The words came suddenly.

"Ye—es," said Delia, with a hysterical sob of relief.

"Oh, if I had killed you!"

"And you," he sighed.

"I wish I had been killed."

Humiliation was biting her like the strokes of a whip.

"I knew myself to be despicable," she said, heedless

of the pain, "in almost all things compared with you. But when you were so much out of breath coming up the hill, I felt there was just one thing, however silly and small it was, in which I should not have to acknowledge myself beaten. I thought I would like you to see there was just one thing I could do. And—and I might have killed you."

As he sat there with his deadly pale face, the knees of his trousers cut, and blood visible on the palms of his hands, he felt that he ought not to let her off lightly. But how was it possible to be harsh with such a Spartan?

"Don't let us talk about it," he said. "Of course, I understand. It was very brave of you to do it, and it is still braver to confess why you did it."

"I shall never be vainglorious again."

"Then so much less the woman you, and that would be a dreadful pity."

Amusement was softening his eyes already.

Delia fought against her tears.

"How miserably weak I am!" she cried. "How you must despise me! I wish you had not come up to me at all. I wish you had let me fall and kill myself!"

Her sense of degradation was a thing very hard to endure.

"I suppose when the truth comes out you can ride better than I, although you told me you had never mounted a horse in your life."

"Or stand on my head better, or play cricket better," he said, laughing.

"No, I oughtn't to have said anything so stupid. But it is because you make me feel so hopeless. You know I began by hating you; and I am afraid I shall end by hating you. You make me feel so miserable."

Nothing seemed able to relieve her rather cruel distress. No words from her friend, however gentle, were able to soften the edge of her humiliation. Why she should be suffering so acutely now the terrible episode was past he did not know. Far was he from suspecting that his own too-potent personality was the cause.

Realizing at last that the pain she suffered was far beyond his power of healing, he rose from the turf and proposed a

return to the house. Hardly a word passed between them on the way back. Her distress seemed to give him a still finer sense of her delicacy. Such a fragility could easily bruise. He found himself speculating on her fate as he walked beside her. The spectre of the average fox-hunting pheasant-shooter rose before his eyes. Was she the predestined victim of some rough-and-ready, conventional-minded savage? Poor little girl, some honest rogue would see to it that she bled!

He left her in the avenue. She stood wistfully to watch his insignificant figure pass out of sight among the trees. She then turned her steps towards a thicket which lay beyond a lawn at the back of the house. Penetrating to the heart of it she flung herself down-beneath a great tree, burying her face in fern, and wept and wept until at last she could weep no more.

CHAPTER XX

PREPARATIONS FOR COMEDY

ALL this time Mrs. Broke was gathering her forces for what lay before her. She was said to rejoice in a dual endowment of courage and wisdom, but the calamity that had come upon her was a tax upon them both. It is a pity that these qualities in conjunction are not more satisfying, but the presence of the one too often implies the necessity for the other.

She recognized acutely the fatal nature of her son's act. She believed that as a family they lived in an hour when every ounce of social prestige they could scrape together must be used to keep their heads above the stream. They had enemies. There would be no lack of volunteers for the agreeable duty of performing the happy dispatch. There were people who would only be too willing to undertake the humane office of inserting a piece of lead in their shoes, so that once in the water there might be no doubt whatever about their going down to "Davy Jones." You cannot be powerful and exclusive, and have a reputation for arrogance, without having a few friends of this kind. Wherever there is a dying lion the jackals gather.

However, in the stoicism of her temper she did not flinch so much as another might have done from the *coup de grâce* of the outside world. She valued power less as a mere possession than for what it could do. The gravest difficulties, when all was said, arose in her own house. Turning the matter over in her mind during the watches of the night, she had to confess, even with full allowance for all the inestimable advantages her wisdom conferred upon her, that there was

one point in which she went in terror of the man whose name she bore.

She had made a comprehensive and exhaustive study of that simple feudal gentleman. In any given situation she was tolerably sure of how he would act. She had made an inventory of his character and ideas. But there were two clauses in it which foreshadowed the gravity of the issue at present besetting him. Sense of humour *nil*; Pride, the algebraic figure x . This eternal unknown quantity baffled her. That apart he stood for a lusty, beef-eating, beer-drinking British farmer; an animal surprisingly amenable, provided you did not keep him waiting for his meals. Up to a point he was about as complex as a horse; up to a point his emotional system could be tabulated with precision and nicety. But this survival of other and darker ages in him was a different matter. Its depths were unplumbed. They were a little terrible, a little legendary. And they derived a further reputation for profundity owing to their limpidity of surface.

Sleeping and awake the problem gave her no peace. The longer she put off the evil hour the more difficult it grew. Yet it was imperative that there should be no delay, lest he find out by other means. It was unlike her to shirk an ordeal, but she would go to bed with the determination to break the news the first thing in the morning; she would rise with the resolution to do so immediately after luncheon; she would dress for dinner and vow to speak of it the last thing before retiring. She began to grow a little despicable in her own eyes. Such weakness was no part of her character.

Maud Wayling also was a person whom it was vital to consider. There must be no delay. In her case the task was less difficult, but Mrs. Broke wanted very much to spare unnecessary pain. To this end she waited until Alice and her aunt had been quietly installed in the small cottage on the hill.

She took an early opportunity of saying:

“Two very dear people in whom I am interested are coming to live in the old empty cottage on the hill. There

has been no one in it, Edmund, since poor old Duffin died. It might as well be occupied as lie idle and rot."

When the rapturously happy women from the purlieus of North London had been settled at last in their new home, Mrs. Broke went one morning to see them. She took Maud Wayling with her. She felt that if the girl had the opportunity of seeing aunt and niece with perfectly disinterested eyes, the impression she would gain might soften the blow they were condemned to deal.

"What did you think of those dear things?" said Mrs. Broke upon their return from the cottage. "Don't you think they are rather beautiful?"

"They are indeed," said the girl, with a little more animation in her eyes than was usual. "I think Alice is the fairest, sweetest creature I have ever seen."

"And the old aunt?"

"The old aunt is a dear. That sweet, old-fashioned curtsey! And the way her voice shook when she gave you the handful of flowers she had picked out of the garden! I would like to steal half of them if I may. And that beautiful haunted old face that seems almost frightened to find itself so happy!"

"Yes, they are rather wonderful. How one envies their joy in simple things."

"What would one not give to have it!" said the girl.

"What, indeed! The more one sees of life the more one realizes that it is arranged upon a basis of compensations."

"Yes," said the girl, "it must be so."

"I took you to see them because there is a rather remarkable story I want to tell you. It involves us both. What you will suffer I shall suffer also." She took the girl's hand. "I only pray that we spare each other."

The dramatic change in the voice of the elder woman startled the girl. Every word was charged with meaning. Yet she could not conceive how the two poor women at the cottage should have a tragic bearing on her life. Mrs. Broke did not allow her to remain long in perplexity. Very briefly she told the story.

"In the name of the fair child whom we have seen this

morning," she said, with both the girl's hands in her own, "I ask you to pardon him."

"There is nothing for me to forgive." The level voice showed not a trace of passion. "He has never cared for me. I have come to feel that."

"Yes, but you!"

Mrs. Broke held the cold fingers firmer. With a sudden movement the girl drew them away and clasped them against her heart.

"The last time we met," she said, "I could see he meant to get free. And if I had not been so selfish I should have made it easier for him. But I was too weak. I don't think I am capable of self-sacrifice. That is the worst of living in a gilded cage. Oh, how weary, how weary I am of my life!" The words were wrung very slowly out of the passionless lips. "I am always thinking of myself. I am doing so now, when, dear Mrs. Broke, I ought to be thinking of you. After all, it falls so very much harder on you. I do feel for you, dear Mrs. Broke. How wonderful you are!"

The elder woman took her in her arms very tenderly.

"I, at least, understand . . . you poor child," she said.

CHAPTER XXI

IN WHICH THE FIRST COMEDIAN MAKES HIS BOW BEFORE
AN APPRECIATIVE AUDIENCE

IN the course of that afternoon Mrs. Broke took the greater plunge under the spur of necessity. She could no longer afford to run the risk of the secret leaking out. She knew Broke too well to continue to incur so great a danger. She must away with cowardice lest she became implicated in the guilt of her son's act.

Broke entered the library wearily, under protest, to engage, as he believed, in a futile discussion of their financial affairs.

"Money, money, money!" he said, sinking, as was his wont during these periods of boredom, into his customary chair at the side of the fire.

"Something new," said his wife, "and something worse." Her brevity was electrical. He sat up suddenly, galvanized by her tone.

"I—ah, can hardly conceive anything worse than our need of money, our eternal attempts to make bricks without straw."

"Try, Edmund."

"That fellow has not been playing tricks?"

"Your guess is excellent."

"They have not—ah, fallen out?"

"No; but Billy has married somebody else."

Broke's "What!" rang through the room like the firing of a shot.

Her brevity was calculated. She had carefully thought out beforehand the best way in which to tell him. Expedience

was in the woof of that sagacious mind. She had come to see that in this case any attempt to sugar the bitter pill would defeat its purpose. These bluntly honest characters demand a perpetual exhibition of that quality in others.

To Broke's shout of amazement his wife opposed a stoical calmness.

"Do you know what you are saying, woman?"

"Edmund," she said, "you may find it just the least bit premature to trumpet your astonishment in this key. Because you have yet to hear the worst. Billy is not only married; he is married to a girl out of Perkin and Warbeck's shop in Bond Street."

Broke rose from his chair. He proceeded to stagger up and down the large room with both hands pressed against the sides of his head.

He made strange noises at intervals.

His wife did not speak a word until this paroxysm was over. It is useless to ask a man to be calm the moment a nerve has been torn out by the roots. She stood watching him with the inscrutable countenance of Juno regarding the frenzies of Jupiter.

"Can you bear details, Edmund?" she said at last.

"I don't know," he said in a rather feeble voice.

In a few succinct phrases, she gave the facts in so far as she was acquainted with them. She concluded her recital in these words:

"Edmund, that is the outline of the affair as it exists. In whatever light one looks at the matter it can only mean ruin. Let us keep that fact ever in mind. But acting on a true conception of the position, I would ask you to be wise as well as just."

He stopped a moment in his pacing of the room, but his reply was inaudible.

"I ask you, Edmund, to give me your help. We cannot undo that which is done, but it may be given to us to make less the consequences of this disaster. I am sure we shall best serve the interests of all concerned by being just. Suffer as we may, we must not fail in our first duty, and that is to the girl he has married."

She breathed heavily as she spoke these words. They were not easy to utter. Stoical she might be, but they galled her cruelly.

A look of dire perplexity clouded Broke's face.

"I don't understand," he said dully.

In his present state of mental chaos she saw it would be futile to proceed. She fell back upon silence, therefore. But the self-possession with which she regarded him was tinged with pity. He was still walking up and down the room in his bewildered and rather sorry manner. He kept clutching at his head, as though he sought to pluck out a thing that was ploughing his brain in furrows. It was as though he sought to lift out bodily that which had overthrown his mind, and hold it up before his eyes in order that he might grasp it more clearly. Words were at last torn from him in slow payments.

"I am only—ah—just making myself—ah—begin to realize the meaning of what you say. At first it sounds so unnatural that it rather knocks you over. Do you think the fellow is mad?"

"In a sense I do; but it is not the sort of madness one could prove before a jury."

"It is such a cruel thing to do as far as we are concerned. He has not thought of us at all."

"Do not let us blame him altogether for that," said the mother of his son. "We ourselves are also a little to blame there. From the first, I am afraid, he has always been given too free a hand."

"Yes, perhaps you are right."

"Young men placed as he has been have such opportunities for making a mess of their lives. It has been our poor boy's misfortune to be born to a state of things in which it is only too easy to pander to the least of your whims. I am afraid he belongs to a very self-indulgent class."

"I deny that," said the hardened aristocrat vehemently.

Perhaps she had spoken with his denial in view. Any slight diversion from the matter that was racking him to pieces would be an act of mercy.

"You may deny it, Edmund, but I hardly think you will be

able to disprove it. One shudders to think of the host of impartial witnesses that could be brought in evidence against us."

"There are no impartial witnesses in our case. Those who are not on our level would always pull us down."

"Why?"

"Human nature, I suppose. If they can't come up to us we've got to come down to them."

His wife, torn as she was, could not forbear to smile a little at the measured tones of this arrogance.

"Yes," she said, trailing her coat in order that he might step on it, "I am afraid democracy owes us a grudge."

"For what?"

"Because there is hardly a lust, hardly a whim which place and power have enabled us to gratify, that we have scrupled to gratify at its expense. Don't we all subscribe to the dogma that the world is to us and our kin? Do we ever hesitate to strain our privileges to gain our ends? All is well, provided we do not defile the sources whence we obtain our purple and fine linen. Our arrogance, our laissez-faire, our complete insensibility to any interests outside our own are bound to recoil upon us in the end."

"I have not the patience to listen," said Broke vehemently.

"You might be one of those orators in Hyde Park. If we are so bad as that, how have we got our position and why have we kept it for so long?"

"We have never found it very easy to keep; and perhaps you will admit we are not finding it easy now. And one suspects that the means by which it came to us were not over nice."

"Why—ah—this Radical Socialist talk?"

"Perhaps one's eyes have been unsealed a little of late. If you, Edmund, could have come with me to the noisome place in the north of London in which these women have lived their lives; if you could have seen the squalor, disease, and hardship which surrounded them, it might have unsealed your eyes too."

Broke made a gesture of impatience. But his wife ignored it studiously.

"Moreover, Edmund, I say this. I am not sure that we

do not deserve to be ruined. I am not sure that all persons such as we have proved ourselves to be ought not to go to the wall. What have we done to justify our existence? We may on occasion have strenuously opposed projects to make the lot of others easier, but we do not appear to have gone beyond that. And when one comes to think over what has happened to us, one can almost see it as an act of Nemesis."

Broke flung up his head.

"You—ah—mean to say he has ruined us because of—ah—such fantastical notions as these?"

"I repeat, Edmund, we may deserve to be ruined."

"Good God, woman, this is cant, Radical cant! You—ah—should go into Parliament as the—ah—representative of labour."

He had man's contempt for the polemical faculty of woman. She could be allowed a free hand to deal with the minutiae of daily life; he could even admit that nature had formed her to deal with things of that sort, for were they not in harmony with the feminine order of mind? But in really large affairs, on political questions, on questions touching authority and tradition, she must not be permitted to hold an opinion. No woman, however wise, could be trusted there. If any better illustration of that truth could be furnished than his wife's attitude towards the marriage of his son, and her advocacy of Socialism in order to justify it, he should be grateful to be shown it.

"This is what you women do," he said. "You find a grain of something that you—ah—persuade yourselves is truth, and you make a peck of nonsense out of it. Please let us have no more of it!"

Mrs. Broke let him have no more. She was not sure that she had spoken with any depth of conviction. There had been an ulterior motive underlying her argument, which in a measure might be said to be fulfilled. His mind had been mercifully diverted from the calamity assailing it. And if his anger could be divorced for the time being from the subject that had called it forth, there was the hope, perhaps too slender to be named, that the first furious force of it might pass.

By nature, however, he was a man with a great power of resentment. In the metaphor of his brother-in-law, "he was a stayer." He could brood upon a private wrong. And by taking thought his sense of outrage was not likely to grow less. When one of his primary ideas was touched he was indeed formidable. Reason could not reach him then. And if it seemed necessary to arm his heart against the first object of its affection, he was the man for the deed. He could be very hard, very pitiless at the dictation of justice.

At dinner that evening the first evidence occurred of this drastic temper. The girls were talking across the table among themselves, and the name of their brother, which was oftener on their lips perhaps than any other, was being freely interchanged.

"Joan," said their father in a tone that was to dwell in their ears evermore, "oblige me by never mentioning that name again when I am present."

The startled creatures shot bewildered glances at one another, and then at their mother. There was the blankest stupefaction in their faces; but their mother met it with the inscrutability that was hers always. As usual, she was a closed book, of which not a line could be read. But the blow had been delivered by one who was a comrade; by one whose natural accessibility rendered it the more tragic. He had never used such a tone to them before. It was terrible. It must have hurt them more than he knew; a single word from him had the power to lacerate. Even as it was he saw their startled, scarlet faces, and his tenderness for them came to their aid.

"Something has happened," he said less harshly. "You—ah—must get your mother to explain it."

Again they turned covert glances to their mother, but her face was a mask.

Afterwards, in privacy, husband and wife sat late into the night. Broke, with a premeditation unusual in him, waited until he had dined before he made the attempt to come to grips with the matter. He wanted to grapple with the thing squarely, to look all round it before he acted; and when act he did he felt it must **not** be said that he was

moved to do so in a moment of passion or imperfect self-control.

Upon taking thought he sat down after dinner and composed a letter. It was written with a deliberation of spirit that sealed his own doom as well as that of his son. It was a bitter and unworthy production, but mercifully short. There was not a sentence in it that a father is not entitled to use ; not a word went beyond the truth or infringed the laws of politeness, but the tone was vigour without warmth, brutality without vehemence. The whole performance was absolutely frigid and unemotional, yet the writer's sense of outrage was cloaked less effectually than he thought.

In effect Broke informed his son that, in consideration of his recent act, he was his son no more except in name. He regretted it was not in his power to denude him of that sole identification of what he had been formerly. Had it been possible, he would have done so, since Billy had been at such pains to prove his unfitness for the estate to which it had pleased providence to call him.

Broke proceeded to issue a decree of banishment. Billy's act had cut him off from his kind. Not again was he to set foot in that house ; his name was not to be spoken in it ; and on the understanding that he did not attempt the contamination of his sisters, nor prejudice his family by appearances in the neighbourhood, he was to receive two hundred pounds a year. Sacrifices had formerly been made to maintain him in a state of decency ; since he had now ceased to have a regard for decency they would no longer be made.

Mrs. Broke read this unfortunate production with a slight flush in her face, and a very odd expression in her eyes. When she had finished she stood a moment irresolutely looking at her husband.

"Fortunately, you cannot send it to-night. It is well that you will be able to sleep upon it."

"I don't propose to give it another thought."

"Not to do so will be very injudicious."

"I cannot agree with you. It quite expresses what I wish to say."

"But it is irrevocable."

"It is intended to be."

She laid her hand on his arm.

"You cannot mean that," she said, with a frightened look in her eyes. "I do not think you realize what it means."

Broke stood before her in silence.

"You cannot realize how wrong, how inhuman it is!"

"It may or it may not be as you say, but I fancy as far as our peace of mind is concerned, we shall do well to consider the matter closed once and for all. We close it now with your permission."

"I do not give it, I cannot give it!" said the mother a little wildly.

Broke sealed the letter without making a reply. His wife took him by the arm.

"I feel sure you do not appreciate all that is involved," she said, turning her scared face up to him. "He is all you have."

"Had I another I would not contribute a farthing to his maintenance."

The mother flushed.

"You speak like a savage," she said.

The mask of inscrutability was in danger of falling from her.

"You cannot do it, Edmund," she said in a queer, rather thin voice. "It will cost too much."

Broke presented a stony disregard. His gesture, or rather his absence of gesture, seemed to suggest that he was a little tired already. Exhibitions of emotion and that kind of neurotic display are apt soon to become fatiguing.

"Edmund, I beseech you to listen"—there was a curious note in that thin voice—"when all is said he is a mere boy. He did not realize it all."

"That is not true." His leisurely directness was like a blow in the face. "He knew what he did, but he did not care. If he did not know what he did, why did he not take daylight to it, like an honest man?"

The mother permitted herself a palpable untruth.

"He was thinking of poor Maud," she said, flushing again

and turning away her face. "He would have done it openly had not their engagement been announced. I blame myself for that. He wanted to spare her. It is to his credit."

Having suppressed a yawn, Broke forced himself to take a renewed interest in the unprofitable discussion. He opened his eyes very wide, and his slow and rather cruel smile sank into the woman before him.

"I—ah—don't believe you," he said. "I—ah—don't believe any of you women. You stick at nothing at a pinch. You are trying to make the best peace you can, and this is how you do it."

"And if it is?" said his wife, a little stung.

"Now suppose I give you a word of advice. Don't interfere. You can't understand. You will be wise to close the matter here and now."

It could not be said of Mrs. Broke that she was deficient in spirit. A grim light burnt in her eyes. It generally portended mischief, as her daughters were so well aware.

"When will you understand, Edmund," she said, with a calmness that was memorable, "that you are not a feudal baron living in the twelfth century? You must please forget your lance and your pole-axe, and remember this is a civilized age."

She was beginning to feel that she was in imminent danger of losing her temper. The tactician was merged already in the woman and the mother. But instinct told her that to lose her temper would mean total defeat. To lead Broke was possible under certain conditions, but any attempt at force must end in disaster.

Once again she had to make the admission that he was a dreadful creature when his blood was up. The survival of the savage in him made it no woman's work to tackle him. She might make tacit appeals to the sense of chivalry, but they are likely to have little weight with such primitive natures when their blood is up. She might be incomparable in finesse; accomplished in thrust and parry work; but these medievalists had a tendency to ride into battle swinging weapons more portentous than the rapier.

She was conscious of a dull anguish rising like a flood

in her heart. To her whose life had been a long victory over emotion, such a sense of its power filled her with horror. If she lost her self-control now her son was doomed ; yet never had it been so hard to keep.

"You don't understand," was Broke's reply to the most piercing of her appeals. "You can't be made to understand. I—ah—dare say it is because you are his mother. Mind, I—ah—don't blame you. I—ah—presume there is something wrong-headed and irrational in being a mother. Take my advice and dismiss the subject."

"I cannot ; believe me, Edmund, I cannot."

Her voice failed suddenly. Almost for the first time in their life together Broke saw a tear. It was not easy for her to weep. Tears had to be distilled drop by drop out of that unyielding spirit. Broke was shocked. He had a reverential tenderness for her, deep down. She was very dear to him ; she was a part of himself. He took her cold hand.

"You must bear up, old girl," he said. "I know it is a facer for you, but you—ah—must try to keep a stiff upper lip. You don't understand, and it is no good trying to make you. But it is a facer for me too—a devil of a facer. I hope—ah—you will do me that justice."

"I do, I do," said his wife. "If I did not I would not hurt you like this. But when you prepare to strike off your left hand to avenge the misdeeds of your right, I cannot stand by and see the deed done."

"It is the sign of our decadence. We don't meet things nowadays. I am no believer in half-measures."

Despair was slowly overcoming Mrs. Broke. Appeals to Broke's humanity, his paternal instinct, his sense of justice were vain. There was nothing to be done. He had got his back against the wall of his unreason, and nothing—nothing could induce him to budge. It made him bleed to see his wife suffer, for at heart there was none more chivalrous. But he was of that unfortunate constitution which finds in its own distress a justification for the indulgence of its prejudice. Had he loved his son less and his wife less there would have been a better chance for all. The pain he suffered removed the last doubt as to whether he was acting worthily.

"I suffer too," he said; and in that statement he felt the guarantee of a lofty disinterestedness.

Mrs. Broke had one quality, however, that her countrymen like to think was attributed to them by the first Napoleon. She did not know when to give in. Strand by strand she felt the rope of unreason coiling around her. Hand and foot it was fettering her. It was like a great serpent pressing out her life. She could no longer raise a finger to help her son. Broke had sealed the letter and the light of reason was not in him. Desperation came upon her. The stay of her life had been her reticence. It had been a rare source of strength in her combats with the world. It would be so again; but in this, the sharpest pass to which her life had yet been brought, it could not help her at all. That being the case, she would do without it. She would cast off its fetters and see if untrammelled nature could avail.

"Edmund," she said, "it may sound a little theatrical for you and me to refer to the number of years we have pulled together, but you force me to remind you that, long as we have done so, this is the first occasion I have asked for anything important. On that ground I ask you not to send that letter."

Such words seemed to drive a tremor through Broke's unexpressive face. She marked it hungrily.

"I have fought your battles, Edmund, for I almost shudder to think how long; I have wrestled with your bitter poverty; I have pared cheese for you that you might still hold on, in the hope of better times; and—and never before to-night have I asked anything in return. And it is a little thing enough now that I have asked it. Do not tell me, Edmund, that I am asking too much."

"You don't understand; you don't understand," Broke muttered, turning away his face.

"Yes, I do, perfectly. It is your inordinate pride of race, and that only, intervening between us."

Her sudden flare into vehemence seemed to strengthen his hand.

"Give it what name you like, but the matter is closed," he said, coming back to his air of finality. "And as you

choose to call it pride a man worth his salt has a right to it. A man, if he hasn't it, is not worth the coat to his shoulders."

"Its intrinsic value does not justify one in pandering to it until it becomes a lust."

"That is unjust," said Broke, feeling the barb. "I am as much knocked about as you are—probably more. Do you think it gives me pleasure? He is as much mine as he is yours. He has my name to him. And yet you talk about my pride being a lust. It is the most unfair thing I have ever heard you say. It is not like you."

She had the satisfaction of seeing that she had drawn blood. But she reined herself in tightly. She held her hand although the opportunity was open to her of hitting very hard. Nor was it policy that dictated the act of self-denial. Judge the man as she might, he was her husband. Than she, at that moment, her sex could show nothing worthier.

"We will not throw stones at one another," she rejoined in a lower voice. "We are too well acquainted for that. But you must not wonder that I complain when I find myself denied the smallest thing I have a right to look for."

Broke carried her hand to his lips reverently.

"My dear girl," he said huskily, "anything—anything but that. I will give you anything but that. If you feel I am ungrateful ask me for something else. Do you think I don't recognize what you have done for us all—what you have done all these years for me and mine? Do you think I don't know? There is not your like anywhere; and if it would give you pleasure I would go and shout it in the street. You have been the pilot that has kept us off the rocks all these years. You have been the truest friend man ever had. If you consider me ungrateful you—ah—wrong me deeply. Come, we will say no more. We are not the people to throw stones at one another."

"For the first time in our married life, Edmund, I crave a boon of you."

Broke covered his face with his hands for an instant, and when he removed them it had seemed to turn grey.

"I will go down on my knees, Edmund, and crave it."

Broke averted his eyes.

“It is a quarter-past three,” he said. “Time we were in bed.”

She was trembling violently.

“You deny it to me, Edmund?”

“If you will go first,” he said, opening the door of the room, “I will turn out the lights.”

While the first comedian was in that act, the first faint salvo of applause from Olympus might have saluted the ear of the attentive listener.

CHAPTER XXII

THE JUMPING OF THE LESSER WITS

FOR several days after the news had been told to those whom it immediately concerned, Mrs. Broke hesitated as to the course to be taken in regard to the world at large. Her husband and Maud Wayling were the only people who knew at present. So clearly did she foresee the complications to which secrecy would give rise that she was keenly desirous that the young wife should be established at once on a proper footing in her new home. In the peculiar circumstances of the case it would not have been difficult to ignore her existence, and in some eyes that might seem the only course possible. But Mrs. Broke was a woman of very strong common sense. It would have been easy to relegate the girl to the limbo whence she had been so recently evolved. But to take no higher ground, if that were done any hope that remained of a reconciliation between father and son would be at an end.

At the same time, if the girl's status were disclosed at once, very little good would be done to her or to Billy, and it would certainly be out of all proportion to the harm that must accrue to themselves. Not only would it provide a nine days' wonder for the neighbourhood, but creditors might see a pretext in it for pressing their demands. And again, even a resolution such as hers was not without a sense of delicacy. The desire to stave off the dread hour of bankruptcy was very real. The innuendo of cause and effect would be a little too sharp to be borne, even by a woman who in soul was a stoic.

After much taking of thought, Mrs. Broke came to the conclusion that for a time it would be wise to keep the catastrophe from the public knowledge. She deemed it right, however, or rather politic—and with her policy was the highest form of virtue—that the girls should know. They had been so well brought up that she felt they could be trusted with a secret which it was vitally necessary to the well-being of all should so remain.

Fear froze their pale lips when they heard that brief, fantastic history. To these sophisticated creatures, raised in a very forcing-house of class consciousness, with full many a generation in their veins of the narrow spirit it induces, the thing was like a nightmare. At first they could give no more credence to it than if it had been the wildest story out of the *Arabian Nights*. But all too soon they knew that for once the inconceivable had come to pass. Their mother was not at all likely to tell them that which was untrue; besides, their father's speech at the dinner-table, at which they had not yet ceased to shiver, still rang in their ears. And for the last three days a curious look had been seen upon the face of Maud Wayling.

In their own domain they forgathered to talk with gloomy excitement. Also they would have wept; only, with the exception of Delia, they all had their mother's frugality in the matter of tears. Compared with the rest Delia was allowed to be a great adept with the waterworks; but this black afternoon, strangely enough, she was the only one who showed no desire to make use of her abilities in this kind. They even grew a little angry with her indifference on the present occasion to the value of her gift. They would have shed fountains had not nature been so austere. But Delia who could have done so was seen to refrain. She had the power to weep copious tears over the commonest circumstance; but now, when tears were expected of her, and in a sense demanded, as an acknowledgment of the poignant distress of one and all, she sat looking frightened, indeed, like the rest, but without so much as one in her eye. It was inconsistent; and in one who could weep it was unfeeling, not to say an exhibition of bad form.

"Delia," said Joan, "I don't think you quite appreciate what has happened. I am sure you would take it more to heart if you did."

"I don't see why we should be so gloomy," said Delia, "if they were really in love."

"If you talk like that," said Joan, "you must go out of the room."

Delia looked bewildered.

"If they were really in love," she persisted, with a shake of the head, and a half-smile to herself.

At once they fell upon Delia. With enormous gusto they fell upon her. They rent her in pieces. They proved to their own sombre satisfaction that her point of view was outrageous. Delia, however, seemed quite incapable of appreciating the nature of her position. That subtle twist in her youthful mind, to which their attention had been directed several times of late, had never been so painfully in evidence.

"You know what your father once said of you," they reminded her, with mournful triumph. "You have not forgotten, Delia, that your father once said that had you been a boy you might have grown up to be a Radical."

"I don't quite know what a Radical is, but perhaps it is something that is rather nice," said their youngest sister, with a perfectly horrid impenitence.

"Delia!" they sang together.

"I know I don't see things as you see them, and I suppose I am very wicked because I don't; but it would not be honest to say I do if I do not, would it?"

"We are all very much ashamed of you," said Joan, with a sternness that made Delia feel very frightened. "You talk just like a person out of a common family."

"I feel like one," said Delia.

"Delia!" they gasped.

"I know I ought to feel myself to be better than other people, but I don't at all. I feel just the meanest and weakest, the smallest and most wretched person you can find anywhere. I don't feel a bit better than anybody else, although my name is Broke. In fact, I would rather be anybody than who I am."

"Delia!" they shouted.

This was anarchy.

"I can't help it. I know I am very wicked and low-spirited, but that is how I feel. There is no pleasure in trying to persuade yourself that you are important if you know you are not. I never could make-believe. I dare say that is why kings and queens are so miserable. Everybody bows down to them and says nice things to them, and pretends that they are different from other people; but the kings and queens know all the time that they are not. That is what makes them so unhappy."

"Do you mean to tell us that Billy is no better than—than this person out of a shop that he has married?" Joan demanded, with a fierceness that made Delia quail.

"Yes, Joan, I do," said her youngest sister, trembling at a piece of effrontery she knew to be without a parallel.

"I shall tell your father what you say," said Joan, withering her with her eyes.

"No, you must not do that," interposed Philippa. "You remember what your father said, you know, Joan?"

"Then I shall tell her mother," said the Roman-hearted one.

"I don't care," said Delia drearily. She clasped her hands round her knees and fixed her eyes on the celebrated picture of her Uncle Charles. "I cannot help it. It is wrong and wicked of me, but I cannot help it. When you are unhappy your long descent does not comfort you."

Large tears filled her eyes suddenly. They completely obliterated the coloured outline of her Uncle Charles on the wall before them.

"You don't deserve to have any descent whatever," said Joan, with a snort.

"I wish I had not," said Delia through her sobs.

"You are what father calls a—a——" Joan paused with an air of great deliberation in order to hunt the one word to wipe her out. "You are what your father would call a Gladstonian Liberal. You bring us into disgrace. It is selfish and debasing and weak-minded to talk as you talk. You are unworthy to be one of us. Do you suppose your

father would have forbidden us to speak of Billy in his presence if Billy had not been *awfully* wicked? ”

“ Don’t, please don’t,” said her youngest sister piteously. “ I cannot bear any more—indeed I can’t.”

“ You shall not be spared,” said Joan in a voice that was merciless.

If haughty looks had the power to slay it is to be feared that Delia would not have survived her present ignominy. Her five sisters were too quaintly the children of their father. They also were subscribers to very few ideas, but those that had once received their sanction were held with an absence of compromise that became a religion. This heresy of their youngest sister’s they felt in the bitterness of the hour to be a stain upon their loyalty. Officially and by accident of birth Delia was one of themselves. It was one of the disadvantages arising from the grand hereditary principle.

“ This is the doing of that horrid man, that horrid bookseller,” said Joan, who had been taking thought where to have the offender for the last two minutes.

Delia winced as though she had been burnt. Her face became enveloped in a sheet of flame.

No sooner was that signal hoisted than the beholders knew that the wretched offender was delivered into their hands. Never was a condign punishment merited more signally. Not only was it a crime of the deepest dye to betray an emotion for any such person, but they saw in it a further act of disloyalty. Joan, and Joan only, the high and inflexible, the one having authority, their father’s deputy, must take up this matter alone and in person. She must administer the extreme rigour of the law, because if such a spirit were allowed to show itself without check in one so young there was no saying to what it might lead. One and all fell back in silence before this august instrument of justice.

“ Delia,” said Joan very slowly, “ your words and conduct are disgraceful. We are so ashamed of you that we wish you were not our sister.”

The other four huddled together with awe-stricken looks, but there was a full measure of approval in their fierce eyes.

An Uncle Charles kind of look came over Delia. When it

appeared in him it never failed to arouse their pity ; but now in their young sister it seemed merely contemptible. It was a sort of look you sometimes saw in the eyes of a hound when it was going to be beaten. But Joan was not the one to spare her.

“ You disgrace us all,” said Joan. “ You are everything that is horrid, wicked, and impossible.”

“ I am not,” said Delia, with a sudden flutter of spirit that was quite indefensible.

“ Yes, you are !” they cried in chorus. “ You are friends with that bookseller, you know you are. You have hardly left off crying since he went away to London. You are disgracing us all. It is quite true what Joan says : you are everything that is horrid, wicked, and impossible. You are a Radical, a Socialist, and a Democrat ; you know you are, and you cannot deny it. We don’t know how you dare to cry about that bookseller. If you must cry over something you might at least have the decency to reserve your tears for a gentleman.”

“ Or why not a dog or a tame pheasant,” said Philippa, whose practical mind was so much admired, “ if you feel you must cry over something ? ”

Delia had been crushed to silence so long as their taunts were levelled at her alone. She had so poor an opinion of herself that she felt she must deserve them. But now they were hurled at one whose character was unassailable, she felt there was firm ground to take her stand upon.

“ You shall not talk of him like that,” she said, with a sudden flash of her blue eyes while a tear started to run along her nose. “ He is as much a gentleman as my father or Billy or Uncle Charles is. He could not be guilty of a mean action ; I don’t think he could be capable of a mean thought ; and if you think it is a disgrace for him to be poor, the disgrace is yours for having such ideas. It would be impossible for him to have such opinions and to speak as horridly as you are speaking now.”

“ A little horror of a bookseller ! A horrid little man ! ” they snorted.

Their youngest sister was not quite so defenceless as they

had supposed. Indeed, she was exulting in new courage because desperation had found weapons for her. And she knew they were far more formidable than any they could wield. She had greater resources of vocabulary than had they, a livelier imagination, and also an array of learned parallels with which to assault them. They had always boasted of their tremendous contempt for books; they should now see how useful it was to have them for your friends.

"You do not deserve to be argued with," said Delia. "Your minds are so poor and wretched that they are not worthy of notice. But I will just say this. I was reading the other day a book by a great author that you have not even heard of, so it is no use to tell you his name. The book was called *The Book of Snobs*, and the people in it were so horrid and cruel and mean-minded that I felt sure they did not exist out of the writer's imagination. But I now find that they do. You are those people. The author meant you, I am certain, and I am quite ashamed to be connected with you. I don't suppose you know what a snob is. I will tell you: a snob is a mean admirer of mean things. Say that over to yourselves; and I wish you would read the book. Then you would see just what you look like to other people."

They were quite taken aback for the moment. This was not the Delia they knew; the Delia they could snub and bully with impunity. This was an armed and courageous Delia, who single-handed could engage and pummel the whole five of them at once. They had never been so astonished in their lives. Fancy a silly little kid with filmy blue eyes with lashes to them that curled up at the ends in a most foolish manner, a silly little kid who wept when she pored with her legs crossed over a fairy story, to be capable of giving such a display as that. For the moment their breaths were completely taken away by it; and one and all were smarting considerably.

As usual in the hour of crisis they paused and waited for their natural leader. That redoubtable young woman slowly gathered herself for the greatest intellectual effort she had ever been called upon to make.

"Books, always books now," said Joan at a leisure quite magnificently forensic. "What do books matter? They are written by vulgar people, as a rule, and it is generally vulgar people who read what is written in them. They are no use after leaving school, and they are not much use before one leaves. I never learnt anything from a single one myself, except from the Badminton hunting-book that my father has got in the library. They look rather nice in their pretty bindings in mother's room; and one or two on the tables in the drawing-room look all right, but what good are they? I always did despise them, and now I have seen a real author, I shall despise them more. I knew that professional authors—Aunt Emma is not a professional author—were generally poor and rather shabby, and did not cut their hair; but until I had seen your friend the bookseller, I didn't really know what *worms* they were. By comparison Wilkins looks respectable and Porson quite a gentleman. Why, Shakespeare, the leading author of them all, was a common poacher, and if he had come before father at the Sessions he would have had to go to prison."

"You are beneath contempt," said Delia.

"So Aunt Emma says," chimed the other four eagerly. "Now that her young man has taught you to be bookish you begin to give yourself airs like she does. You are learning the same trick of talking *at* us, although you have not got your voice quite so high up at present. But you must not think we shall stand it from you, you silly little donkey, because we shall not, Joan, shall we?"

"No, indeed," said that warrior.

"I hate Aunt Emma too. She is beneath contempt also."

"But you try to talk like her."

"I don't!"

"Yes, you do."

The reference to Aunt Emma had been an inspiration. It had completely taken the wind out of Delia's sails. The tables were turned at once. Could it be possible, thought Delia, that her mind at all resembled Aunt Emma's? It would be hopeless to make her sisters see any difference. In their opinion to be a lover of books was to be an Aunt

Emma : a synonym for all that was pretentious and insincere.

They routed Delia utterly and completely by this chance shot. She struck her colours altogether before this unlucky mention of the author of *Poses in the Opaque*. The fervour of the prophet preaching a strange, splendid gospel to Islam was in her no more. She was beaten out of the field ; and put to flight to her bedroom, that sanctuary wherein she could take refuge in tears.

CHAPTER XXIII

A DESCENT INTO THE AVERNUS OF BROAD FARCE

MANY hours of late had Delia spent coiled up on her counterpane. In the very hour of her friend's going away she had been overcome by the sense of loss. She would look on him no more. The fact seemed too cruel to be borne. A spectre had glided across her life, only to vanish after she had gazed upon it for one brief but fatal instant, to leave her haunted for ever in the manner of the unhappy knight of La Belle Dame Sans Merci. He had cast a spell upon her which he alone had the power to remove; and without any recognition of her pass he rode away into those immeasurable mountain fastnesses in which he would be lost forever.

He was gone, leaving only a memory. He could never return. An unpitiful introspection had taught her that she was too poor a specimen of her kind to arouse an emotion in that high and noble spirit. The knowledge did but render the craving to do so more insurgent. If only she could have conveyed a faint sense of her devotion; if only one little spark of recognition could have been kindled in him; if only her nature had had the power to walk with his in the humblest way, she would have asked no more!

He could not know now and would not know ever. He had gone from her without a sign, leaving her to mourn the day on which he had come into her life. She would read his name in the London newspapers, but of her existence there would be no record. In a year or perhaps less he would not remember her at all. Even now he might be erasing her from the tablets of his mind. From year to year she must

bear her adoration to the grave without hope of honour, without hope of recompense. He would never know what candles she kept burning before the altar of his memory.

Against the instinct that pleaded with her had she clung to the hope that she would not be kept desolate. Right up to that last day had she clung with a fearing spirit to the thought that was hardly more than a wish, to the hope that was hardly more than a desire, that he would give her just one token by which she might recognize that she counted in the sum of things. But not a crumb did he bestow. He bade her good-bye with his air of slightly ironical tenderness. There was no more than that.

A thousand times did she recall his voice ; a thousand times did chance words of his come back to her. She had little of the stoical pride of her race. It was not hers to cover the ravages in her breast with an outward smile ; her heaviness of eye, her lassitude were there for all to read. Her sisters read with fierce contempt. Every day it was dealt in fuller measure. They threatened to bar the door of their common room against her. Her mother was too much occupied with graver matters to notice her unhappiness. Besides, their ailments were so few that they hardly ever troubled her ; and when they did were always so simple that the most homely of prescriptions could set them right. Her father was too little addicted to the habit of observing anything to notice the symptoms of her subtle disease. Besides, it was so elusive that in any case it would have defeated him. If you broke a limb you knew where you were ; it could be set in splints ; but you do not ask a horse doctor to diagnose a disease of the mind.

Strangely it was her Uncle Charles, a person given over entirely to the drinking of whisky, who first called public attention to her distress. One rainy afternoon when they were drinking their tea in the drawing-room, as a concession to the presence of Aunt Emma, who had come on an errand of charity, and yet more particularly to that of their Uncle Charles, who also had happened to look in not knowing Aunt Emma was there, he took Delia's chin between his

thumb and his finger, and peered at her closely with his head cocked funnily to one side.

"I tell you what it is," he said. "The little filly's off her feed. Has been for the past fortnight."

This solicitude drew down a great deal more of the public attention upon Delia than she felt able to support.

"She's right enough," said her father.

"The child has probably been over-eating herself," said her Aunt Emma after a steady examination through her glasses.

Her mother gave her the benefit of a silent scrutiny. She concluded it by smiling faintly. There was little that was hidden from those ruthless eyes.

"I tell you I don't like the looks of the tit," said her Uncle Charles, who had waited in vain for a confirmation of his opinion. "I should let her see the vet."

"Nonsense, my dear Charles," said her mother amiably. "There is really nothing the matter. Her studies have perhaps excited her a little. But they are over now for a time. Her tutor has very inconsiderately run away and left her."

Instead of looking at her brother when she gave this piece of information, Mrs. Broke allowed her eyes to rest placidly upon the face of her youngest daughter.

"It is an act of inconsideration, not to say incivility, not to say impertinence," said Lady Bosket, winding herself up word by word into a state of indignation, "and in the letter I wrote to him upon the subject I took the opportunity of expressing my displeasure. If a particular task is undertaken one looks for it to be fulfilled."

"But the circumstances were a little exceptional, were they not?" said Mrs. Broke. "Had he not the offer of a more important post? I understood so at least. In the circumstances one can hardly expect a man of ability to waste his time with a dull and backward child."

"He did not hold it to be a waste of time before this post came to him. And pray, by whose agency did it come to him?"

"By yours, my dear?"

"Well, perhaps, one does count a little with editors these days," purred the authoress modestly.

"Truly an interesting sidelight, my dear, upon the world of letters," said her sister-in-law in her melodious voice. "It is really strange how the flood tide of one mighty reputation bears everything before it."

"So true, my dear. Poor dear Mr. Gladstone and I often used to commiserate each other upon that point."

"Also the poor devils the publishers, I suppose," said Lord Bosket, taking a sip of his favourite beverage, "when you hawk round your prose to every house in London to squeeze the last ha'penny."

"Charles, what do you mean?" said the authoress, raising her glasses imperiously by their tortoise-shell handle.

"Beg pardon, my mistake," said the culprit humbly.

"As usual a prophet is not without honour, save in one's own country," said the gifted lady, trying to efface the banality of her spouse with a gentle and refined humour.

"You may be a profit in your own country," said her lord, "but you ain't a bare livin' in theirs. I know one publisher feller who says that if you will insist on your present royalties it will pay him to draw down the blinds and look about for an honest livin'."

"Charles, I forbid you to discuss these disgusting commercial details in my presence."

"Wrong again," murmured Lord Bosket *sotto voce* to his nieces. "Crushed again. Never open my mouth but what I put my foot in it."

"Has your last beautiful and ennobling volume been a success, my dear?" asked Mrs. Broke, replenishing the teapot.

"Not half," said Lord Bosket. "I read in a newspaper the other day that it has stirred the great heart of the American continent to its profoundest depths. They want her to cross the Pond and give 'em a series of lectures. So do I. If she takes out the same series as she has given at home she'll be a success. I'll lay even money that the great heart of the American continent is stirred a bit more. They don't know what they are askin'."

The valour that was in Lord Bosket this afternoon was unusual. As meek as a mouse as a rule in the presence of his gifted wife, he seldom went out of his way to court her displeasure. But when a spark of spirit did happen to assert itself in him it was generally in the presence of others. He knew that for the time being he was safe, for the last thing his spouse desired was to make a public display of her prowess. Anything in the nature of a scene was of course vulgar. On those occasions when her lord had partaken of just the right quantity of whisky to enable him to merge a proper discretion in a natural love of chaff, Lady Bosket waited, in the phrase of ladies in a less exalted station in life, "she waited until she got him home."

Probably the true reason for Lord Bosket's intrepidity this afternoon was that he was in a rather uncomfortable frame of mind. Knowledge which had recently come to him had disturbed his peace. He was distressed not so much on his own account—he was too heedless of the world to care particularly of the figure he might cut in it—but rather because of the dire blow that was about to descend on his brother-in-law, whose spirit could brook no public ignominy. With his usual solicitude for others, he felt himself already to be responsible for the galling of that proud breast. It was he who had urged Broke to accept a seat on the board of the Thames Valley Goldfields Syndicate. He had seen in it a heaven-sent opportunity for a beautiful, ineffectual angel of commerce to reap a golden harvest, without risking one of the pence with which he could so ill afford to gamble. Lord Bosket was there that afternoon, however, to inform Broke that the great scheme had fallen to the ground. Moreover, it was his disagreeable duty to prepare the nice mind of this paladin for a development that could be trusted to shock it terribly.

"I saw Salmon this mornin', Edmund, and he says we have got to face the music."

Broke's bewilderment was so frank that Lord Bosket felt it necessary to be a little more lucid.

"Salmon says, you know, that there is no gold in the Thames Valley after all, and that those experts were all

wrong. And he says the shareholders are kickin' up a shine and are askin' for their money back. Salmon says they won't get it. The newspapers are against us dead, and they say that when the matter is sifted to the bottom it will be found to be about the biggest take-in of the century. Nice for us directors, what? A public inquiry has been ordered, and they are sayin' in town that if we directors get our deserts we shall find ourselves in the dock."

Had Lord Bosket planted a bomb on the carpet the effect upon Broke could not have been more dramatic. He sat up in his chair with a painfully startled face, with much of the same wild look in it that his wife had seen when she told him of his son's marriage. But on this occasion he did not vent his feelings in words beyond the monosyllable—

"Oh!"

Lord Bosket made an effort to soften the rather tragic impression his words had created. He felt a pang; indeed, Broke's distress would have melted a harder heart.

"I would not think too much about it, Edmund, if I were you. Salmon is a cute fish and knows his way about under the water. He'll find a way out, don't you worry. He says if anybody is to blame it's the experts; and it is not likely that we directors would be holding so many shares if we had not been taken in."

"But I don't hold any," said Broke in a hollow voice.

"Oh, yes, you do, my boy," said his brother-in-law. "You could hardly be chairman of the company without. And I understand that Salmon took the precaution of transferring a block of his to you in case of accident."

Suddenly Lord Bosket's jaw dropped.

"Yes; and that reminds me, he has sold 'em again! He unloaded three weeks ago and some of us were told to do the same. They were then above par—Lord knows how much!—and now you can have Thames Valley Goldfields at fourpence a hundred if you want 'em. Yes, by Jove, when you come to look at things, they certainly do seem a bit queer!"

Poor Broke sat in a huddle. The startled look that still haunted his face was like that of a man who had just seen a ghost.

"Surely this is a sequel that was to be foreseen," said Lady Bosket. "Charles, I predicted it from the first. People who associate themselves with such atrocious persons as this Lord Salmon must be prepared to take the consequences. You might at least have had the decency to respect my feelings, Charles. Not only do you bring your own name to the mire, but what is far worse, you bring mine. Why should one strive to keep it fragrant among one's fellows if you merely debase it on every possible occasion? As for Edmund, I am sure he is the last man in the world to be able to afford to bring his name lower than it is already."

"You let Edmund alone!" interposed her lord. "Don't you mind her, my boy. I take all the blame for this. But Salmon will find a way out all right. It may be a bit awkward for us at first, now that these shareholders and people are showing their teeth, but we shall come out top dog in the end, I'll lay a monkey."

"We—ah—must refund every farthing of their money," said Broke.

He had been sunk in thought, and this was the result of that painful process.

"A little item of four million sterling," said his brother-in-law. "I should like to see Fishy refunding mere bagatelles of that sort."

"It must be done," said Broke firmly. "Every penny."

"Well, my boy, sell your house and furniture and throw in the mortgages on your land, and see how much that makes towards it. The affair has an ugly look, I'll admit; but Salmon says that all of us, shareholders and directors alike, were in the hands of the experts. And now the experts are proved to be wrong they throw the blame on us. Salmon says there is no law in the world that can touch us."

"There is one in heaven," said Lady Bosket.

"It didn't prevent you from clearing a cool three thousand, missis, by selling at the proper time. Hullo, here's Salmon himself."

The announcement at this moment of that peer was sufficiently dramatic. His appearance was no less so.

Entering with his habitual air of victory, signs of dejection or of hesitation were far to seek.

He took a chair magnificently.

"They have arranged a fête and gala for the meeting on Monday," he said. "But I think there are one or two things we shall be able to put before it. If we can't manage that parcel of crows and pigeons it's a pity. Country parsons mostly, and half-pay soldier men. I wonder if they think we are going to take it lying down. They had the prospectus to guide them the same as we had; there were the reports of the experts: Goodliffe's analysis of the mud taken from under Battersea Bridge; Thomson's Theory of the Precious Metal Deposits found on the foreshore at the Welsh Harp; Wilson's article on Bimetallism, and God knows what besides; and now they've put their money down they calmly ask to take it up again. Do they think we are in business for our health? If they had had the nous to clear out when we did, I wonder if they would be wanting now to repudiate their shares. Their game is heads I win, tails you lose; but that's hardly good enough for Saul Salmon, thank you."

"Hear, hear, and applause!" said Lord Bosket. "I must say as a member of the board, the Promoter talks like a cock-angel with wings and a white nightshirt. I don't often have a bet, Fishy, as you know, but I would like to lay a monkey on you, my son, and back you both ways."

"You would not be wrong, Bos, if you did," said Lord Salmon heartily. "They shall see on Monday whether a jury of matrons is going to heckle me."

"Ye—es, I am afraid they are on the wrong horse," said Lord Bosket, with a quaintly reflective glance at the glass he held in his hand.

It was at this moment that Broke was seen to draw himself up to regard his unwelcome visitor.

"Lord Salmon, I should like to—ah—say a word. I wish in the—ah—fullest manner to—ah—repudiate the whole of this transaction."

"So do several other people," said Lord Salmon drily.

"In the most unconditional way I wash my hands of what I do not hesitate to call a—ah—a shady business."

"Don't hesitate to call it what you like, but we are all in the same boat. You are one of the crew, the same as we are."

Broke's face turned a deep tawny.

"I never intended to go on this board of directors. I was led into so doing against my—ah—judgment. At the time I did not know precisely—ah—what I was undertaking. I can only regret my—ah—ignorance."

The painfully agitated gentleman had the greatest difficulty in making this statement.

"Woa—easy, Edmund," said his brother-in-law, in a tone of pity. "Let it go, there's a good feller, and it will all come right. It will, Fishy, won't it?"

"Not much doubt about that," said Lord Salmon, accepting a cup of tea from the excessively gracious hands of Mrs. Broke.

"Sugar, Lord Salmon?"

Such was the sweetness of the smile she lifted up to him that the delighted financier said:

"Look into the cup, ma'am, and it won't be needed."

Lady Bosket raised her glasses impressively to gaze at the epigrammatist, while her eldest niece seated opposite to her counted mentally as far as one hundred and seven.

"Lord Salmon," said Broke, whose agitation grew more painful at every word he spoke, "I cannot help—ah—thinking that I have been hoodwinked, and—ah—that I have been made your tool. I am a plain man and speak on these occasions what is in my—ah—my mind."

"Quite right," Lord Salmon nodded his head in approval. "Have the habit myself. Admire you for it."

"I don't ask for your—ah—your admiration, Lord Salmon. As a matter of fact, I would—ah—rather be without it. But I may say, Lord Salmon, that I shall—ah—conceive it to be my—ah—duty to attend this meeting on Monday, when I—ah—shall make a statement to the shareholders."

He concluded his painful exordium by pulling a voluminous bandanna handkerchief out of his pocket and wiping his head with vigour.

Lord Salmon could not forbear to laugh loudly, and by so doing chose to ignore a series of energetic signals that Lord Bosket directed to him.

"You ought to go on the stage, my dear fellow," said the financier. "You are a humorist and no mistake. Here am I trying to put you in for a good thing, and here are you turning round to bite the hand of friendship. Why, do you know what I did? I said to myself, There should be a few crumbs to be picked up here; it will do Broke no harm to be in at this. And what do I do? I dare say Bosket has told you. No? Well, I set aside for you five hundred pounds worth of my own scrip; partly because I want to do you a good turn, and partly because it looks well for the chairman of the directors to be as deep as possible in the concern. And when a few weeks ago the right moment came, I converted that five hundred pounds worth of shares into a little matter of three thousand pounds in hard cash. There is a cheque for that amount in my pocket-book. And yet, my dear fellow, you sit there and give me the rough side to your tongue. Still, I don't bear malice; others might, don't you know, but personally I understand you, and I like you. You old-fashioned country bigwigs are a funny-tempered lot; but I want you to understand that as a mere matter of principle I wish you well."

"I—ah—dissociate myself entirely from your schemes, Lord Salmon. I—ah—decline to discuss the—ah—matter further. I—ah—repudiate the whole transaction, and on Monday I propose to—ah—make my position clear to the shareholders of the company. In the meantime, Lord Salmon, I—ah—wash my hands of the whole affair."

"You wash your hands of this?" Lord Salmon's air was one of keen enjoyment.

With carefully studied effect he took out his pocket-book, and produced a cheque for three thousand, one hundred and thirty-five pounds, three shillings and ninepence drawn in Broke's favour. He rose from his chair and carried it over to him.

"This—ah—for me?"

Broke's bewilderment seemed very great.

"Of course, of course, my dear fellow!"

Again Lord Salmon burst into loud laughter.

In the meantime Broke had looked at the document, and by a superhuman effort of the mind was able to divine its nature. With great deliberation he began to tear it into very small pieces. In the act his fingers trembled so much that some of the fragments fell on to the carpet.

There came a rather painful silence. It was broken by the pathetic tones of Lord Bosket.

"Edmund, you are a fool. I should ha' thought you had more sense than to throw away money. It's an expensive luxury; not many fellers can afford it."

"It's as good as a play," laughed Lord Salmon.

Without trusting himself to speak a word, Broke flung the last of the fragments of paper on to the carpet, slowly got up from his chair, and stalked out of the room. As the door closed behind him, Lord Salmon's laughter rose higher.

"Splendid fellow!" he shouted.

"Lord Salmon, please let me give you another cup of tea," pleaded the mellifluous accents of Mrs. Broke. Again she beamed upon the eminent financier.

"Certainly, ma'am, certainly."

"Joan," said Lady Bosket to the niece who sat opposite to her, and who had not once taken her eyes from her face during the last quarter of an hour, "have the goodness to ring for my carriage."

Joan rang the bell promptly, and with almost equal promptitude the butler appeared.

"Porson, my carriage."

Without taking leave of any one except her hostess, Lady Bosket marched out of the room with a stateliness that was rather awe-inspiring.

Lord Salmon turned to the husband of the gifted lady with his laugh subsiding to a chuckle.

"I've read your wife's books, Bos, and I've admired them, but I don't think I should call her a great hand at conversation. She seems to have a habit of repeating herself. Does she ever say anything but, 'Porson, my carriage'?"

The financier again ascended to a roar.

"That's your luck, Fishy," said his friend. "They say you are the luckiest feller in England, and by God you are. But you mustn't mind her, Fishy; it's only pretty Fanny's way. She is not such a bad old thing when you get to know her."

With this amende to the feelings of his friend, Lord Bosket began to converse with him in earnest undertones. They agreed that it might be easier to take the Thames out of its valley than to divorce Broke from a conviction at which he had once arrived.

"He'll do it, you know," said his brother-in-law. "He's as stubborn as a colt if he gets an idea into his fat head. He don't get many, but when they come they stay."

"If he talks at the meeting as he's talked to me," said Lord Salmon, "he will be the laughing-stock of England. He must be stopped; I don't like to see a man like that making a fool of himself."

"I'd like to see the man who could stop him. Obstinate feller!"

"A thousand pities," said Lord Salmon. "I don't wonder that he's coming to beggary. If a man won't move with the times, even if he goes back in a direct line to Adam and Eve, there is only the workhouse for him. We are no respecters of persons at this time of day; that's what you swells have got to learn. Most of you have learnt it, I will do you that justice. You know you can't stand before the cad with the money-bags. Sooner or later you have got to get on to your knees. Broke is having a longer run than most, but you and I will live to see him brought to it. He's as good as down now, although he doesn't know it."

"He wouldn't own it if he did."

"You are right, my boy; but sooner or later he'll be made. When Saul Salmon, as a very young man, first came out of the east and set up his plate in Park Lane the snobocracy would not turn their heads to look at him. But now, my boy, now he holds them in his two hands thus, it's another pair of trousers. How do you think I got the handle to my name I wear for advertising purposes? Simply, my boy, by taking them so, in my rude hands, and half choking

the lives out of a few of the choicest specimens. He who pays the piper calls the tune. Without my purse I am a cad ; with it I am a god."

There was a strange arrogance in the face of the millionaire.

"You must be kind to poor Edmund, Fishy," said his companion humbly.

"Yes, Bos, I will. For some reason I took to him from the start. I like the bull-dog in him ; he don't know when he's beat ; he's a man after my own heart. I began life without a rag to my back ; he's finishing without one. But we are both of us grit. It made me and it might save him. Edmund Broke cares for nothing and nobody ; neither do I."

"You are right, Fishy ; the poor devil is broke, stony, done for, but he's grit right through. I love the feller myself."

"All the same, Bos, he will have to come to it, mind you. He tears up my cheque and throws it in my face, just as people who are as good as he have done before him. Now they feed out of the hand. Edmund Broke will do the same one of these fine mornings. If you saw the letters I get from the Aristocracy—with a capital A—from peeresses on the look-out for pin money and peers wanting pipelights, it would make you smile. Take this morning : five applications for company tips from women with titles—not all in the beerge either. Six invitations to dinner ; three for Sunday in the country ; and as for dances and parties, if Phœbus Apollo came driving along Piccadilly in a golden automobile, he could not be more deuced popular. And why is it, do you think ? Would you say it is for my *beaux yeux*, my boy ? Tchah ! Catch them kissing the hem of the garment of an obese and rather elderly Jew, if there was not to be a few shekels at the end. They are out for something, Bosket, but between you and me they don't always get it. I pick and I choose, and I make it a rule to give to the deserving poor. And now and again, if it amuses me, I enjoy the prerogative of my race and exact my pound of flesh. I have one or two anecdotes of my dealings with these fools and harpies that

would amuse you. And sometimes when I have a craving for relaxation, I grind some wretched devil with my heel."

"But not poor Edmund, Fishy."

"No, I've given my word. And I sometimes keep it. I deplore his stand-off ways for his own sake ; but I like them. I like your man who is so devilish full of style that he prefers to be knocked down and killed rather than turn his stiff neck to see which way the traffic's running. But there is no chance for that man in these days. He might as well give up the game if he won't learn how to play it."

"So I tell him. I tell him that every day of his life. But, bless you, what does he care? Tell me, Fishy, what can a feller do with a feller who is born eight hundred years out of his time?"

"You can watch him rot," said Lord Salmon succinctly.

CHAPTER XXIV

IN WHICH MR. BURCHELL CRIES "FUDGE!"

BROKE, in the stress of his affairs, had recourse to that sage counsellor, brilliant man of business, and past master of commercial first principles, Mr. Joseph Breffit. So rapidly was that eminent person approaching the term allotted to man, and in such a remarkable degree had fortune smiled upon his labours in the many vineyards of the world to which he had directed his talents, that he had already passed into an elegant retirement wherein his declining years could seek asylum. He was now living what it gave him pleasure to call "the life of a gentleman" in the great house in the county he had purchased for and had placed at the disposal of his son.

He still did a little business on occasion, but it was not so exacting, not so all-absorbing as that of the old days at Cuttisham. There were still a favoured few among his clients whose affairs he deigned to supervise in a general way. To these favourites of fortune, foremost among whom, of course, was Edmund Broke, the great man was still accessible at those seasons when it became imperative that they should arm themselves with his wisdom. But he liked even those of the elect to feel that he was something of a potentate now; that no longer did he scurry hither and thither over the shire at the beck of this landowner and that; moreover, they could not depend on finding him at his office at Cuttisham so many days in the week, year in, year out, between the hours of ten and four.

Those who now desired to confer with Mr. Joseph Breffit must seek audience in all humility at his seat in the county,

Tufton Hall, lately in the occupation of Lord Algernon Raynes. Among his clients it had been often remarked of late that old Joe Breffit had become a great man since he had taken the quaint notion to live at poor Algy's place. But however they might smile and shrug their shoulders, and shake their heads, it was not always possible to do without old Joe. A time seemed to come to them all when they must have his services at any cost. "Old Joe is the shrewdest man in England, I don't care where you look for the others," had been the verdict of one harassed squire; and in the process of time that patent truth had become a proverb among his kind.

To Tufton Hall came Broke on the morning following the revelations in the matter of the Thames Valley Goldfields Syndicate. Grim and bitter were his pangs that he should live to see old Joe Breffit, of all people in the world, installed in the room of poor Algy, in the house a former scion of a ducal line had built, on a day that was hardly legible on the scroll of antiquity. Broke had something of the feelings a man might have had in awakening from a sleep of a hundred years. All the old standards by which he was wont to gauge men and things had seemed to have disappeared.

There was no end to Trade's ruthless ravages. Nothing was sacred from it. The fair spots of earth, dedicated from immemorial time by usage and custom to unimpeachable gentlemen of feudal tastes, were being filched away by this race of cunning capitalists and greedy manufacturers. What would his father have thought, the staunch and four-square old Tory who twice refused a peerage because that once-worthy institution had fallen into the hands of the middle class, what would this fine old Englishman have thought could he have seen motor-cars superseding horseflesh, and such a man as old Joe Breffit taking up his residence at Tufton Hall!

When Broke found himself on the terrace under the shadows of a gloomy façade that had won for the place its reputation of one of the show houses of England, he felt himself shiver in the involuntary manner which in the popular mind is held to portend that some one is walking

over your grave. The fate of this sombre pile struck home. His own decay was thrown across his imagination in the form of a sinister parallel. Vividly it foreshadowed the day when Covenden itself, the home of an older race than even that of Raynes, should fall a victim to the time-spirit. "Upon my word!" Broke mused, "it is sacrilege for old Breffit to set his foot here. We have 'Arrys in the hunting-field; tradesmen at the covert-side; now we have come to this."

A gorgeous individual, faultless in pose and appointment, conducted our hero across the tiled hall, embellished above with a gallery and a priceless ceiling by Verrio; and below with tapestries rescued from Spain, and Louis Quinze furniture, every piece of which was supposed to have received the sanction of La Pompadour; while upon the walls was a particularly fine set of ancestral portraits ranging from Holbein to Watts, with an occasional Vandyck, Lely, Kneller, Reynolds, Raeburn, and Gainsborough by the way.

The new owner of this magnificence was discovered in a spacious morning-room. His nether man was clad in a brand-new pair of hacking-breeches by a specialist of Savile Row, but being at the moment in an elegant undress, other details of his attire were hardly in the same key. For the sake of ease he had donned neither boots nor leggings at this early hour. Therefore, the parts they concealed were exposed to view in three sections, consisting in white drawers, red silk socks, and carpet slippers with cunning work in beads upon the top. The white stock was virgin in its purity, but not so the shirt and collar; the tattersall waistcoat was a thing of beauty, even if a large spot of grease in the centre hardly came within its wonderful and fearful scheme of colour, although, like a middle tint in an impressionist landscape, to some eyes it might have seemed an embellishment. As a set-off to all these superlative things was a chin that had not very recently known a razor, while a ragged smoking-jacket, stained and discoloured all hues save the original of twenty years before, gave a further touch of the grotesque to an appearance which Broke had felt already did not require it.

Mr. Breffit was seated at a table, and on it lay a sheet of

note-paper with a list of names written in pencil. Near the paper was an open book, over which, eye-glasses on nose, he had been poring assiduously. It was a volume of Sir Horatio Hare's fascinating if slightly cumbersome work, *The Peerage, Baronetage, Knightage, and Landed Gentry*.

"Ha, Mr. Broke," he said, holding out his hand with great cordiality but without rising from his chair, "delighted to see you. This is indeed a great pleasure. Will you take a little refreshment? Say a glass of wine now, say a glass of wine?"

Broke accepted the hand and declined the wine without any display of effusion. Mr. Breffit was frankly disappointed.

"Say a drop of port, now? What do you say to a drop of port? I've got some I can recommend. Forty-seven. That ought to be good enough, even for you, Mr. Broke, eh? The old Duke laid it down, but I take it up, ha! ha! Come now, just one glass for the sake of old times, sir."

This offer was also declined with the same absence of effusion.

"Well, well," said Mr. Breffit, with a sigh, "I suppose you know best, Mr. Broke. It doesn't agree with everybody in the morning before dinner—I mean lunch. It don't with me. Or do you prefer champagne, sir? Say so if you do; there is plenty in the same place as the port. I've got a nice dry wine you need not be afraid of. In fact, my dear sir, if it comes to that I have got about the best cellar in the county. His lordship and his father before him knew a few things about wine, I can tell you. Come, now, Mr. Broke, just a leetle drop of 'boy' for old sake's sake."

Broke remained equally impervious to the blandishments of champagne. Rather pointedly he stated the business that had brought him there. But this morning it seemed a really difficult matter to bring old Breffit down to the mundane. It was almost as if he was a little overborne by the position in which he found himself; it was almost as if his new surroundings were proving a little too much for him. For the first time in Broke's long experience of his ways he thought he discerned a retrograde tendency, a tendency to insist upon his own importance. There was even a disposition this morning to forget that subtle degree of homage

that was wont, as it were, to oil the wheels of their intercourse. It had not always been so subtle either for that matter ; there had been times when old Breffit's flummery had got on Broke's nerves a little. *That*, however, he had overlooked. Breffit had always been an eminently well-meaning man. But the suggestion of familiarity, of *off-handedness* that he displayed this morning, jarred a little on those pontifical nerves. A devoutly religious nature may occasionally deplore the presence of too much incense, but too little cuts it to the heart.

"What do you think of my little place ?" said Mr. Breffit, almost before Broke had had time to furnish his succinct account of the threatened disaster to the Thames Valley Goldfields Syndicate. "Not a bad place, is it, sir ?"

Broke was not able to show any particular enthusiasm for the little place. The pride of ownership which swelled the voice of old Breffit caused him somewhat comically to cock his eye at that personage, and to stroke his chin thoughtfully.

"There is everything here, you know," said the new owner. "It would surprise you, it would indeed, to see the number of people who come 'ere from all parts of the world and from America especially, to look at what we've got. We set certain days apart, you know, on which to throw the 'ouse and grounds open to the public. It is very inconvenient, you know, sometimes to be mistaken for the butler, and now and then to get a tip ; or when you are sitting at dinner—I mean lunch—to see them pressing their noses against the windows : it gives you a kind of feeling that they 'ave come to watch the lions feed. But, after all, these are part of our responsibilities. *Noblesse oblige*—I dare say you 'ave felt the same thing yourself."

"Humph !" said Broke.

"I suppose it is only right. We ought not to be selfish in these matters. We ought to do what we can to elevate the masses. If it educates them and gives them 'igher thoughts to look at old oil paintings, I am not the one to say them nay. 'Let them all come' is my motto. But I feel a great responsibility, Mr. Broke, all the same. You see, Lord

Algernon was—you will, ahem! pardon my frankness, but it has always been my rule to speak out—Lord Algernon was not at all particular. He 'ung up pictures of nude figures of both sexes."

"Humph!"

"I understand one of the ceilings is by Marie Corelli—the one with the little flying angels on it. Very pure and 'igh-minded, I call it, considering the subject—'Beauty in Distress'—and 'Beauty' is so nicely dressed that it ought to be a fine moral lesson to some other artists I could name. I call that ceiling 'armless, sir. Very moral and elevating. But personally the landscapes appeal to me most. There's a genuine Claude Duval. And that little thing in a gilt frame on the right hand as you enter is supposed to be a genuine Theodore Watts Dunton."

"Humph!"

"Then, sir, the furniture is worthy of attention. There is a Chippendale cabinet and a Sheraton sideboard with poker work inlaid; the chairs are mostly Paul Very-uneasy and Lewis Carroll. The piano in the blue drawing-room is an upright Stradivarius on which Ole Bull had the honour of playing 'Home, Sweet Home' before her Majesty at Cowes."

"Humph!"

"The grounds are worthy of attention also. There are several trees planted by the late Prince Consort, also one or two cut down by the late Mr. Gladstone."

"Humph!"

"There are all things and everything. In the cabinet in the yellow room among the curios there is the air-cushion that was kept for the Prince Regent to sit on when he had the gout. There is the identical penny doll the Prince of Wales wore in his hat when he went to the Derby in '67. There is Queen Anne's favourite snuff-box; and a strip of the shift in which Mother Brownrigg was executed. There are the shoes of a Derby winner bred and owned by Lord Algernon's father, the late Duke; and there are buttons from the pantaloons worn by Old Q and Lord George Bentinck on the memorable occasion. In fact, Mr. Broke, there are a thousand and one things too numerous to refer to. I shall be very

happy, sir, personally to take you on a tour of the house and grounds as I do parties of excursionists."

"Humph!"

"But, you know, Mr. Broke"—the old man's voice seemed to grow pregnant with mystery—"I have always maintained it is not manners that maketh man so much as his surroundings. To-morrow we start our entertaining. There is a lot of real swells coming here, friends of my son's. They would never have thought of coming to my hole-and-corner little house at Cuttisham, but here, sir, you see, it's different. They are all the real thing, sir, every one; you would not be ashamed to meet them yourself. I wish you would name a day on which you could come over and dine with us. And we should be delighted to put you up; no end of room, you know. I have just been looking out who these friends of his are; all their names are in Debrett, so they are perfectly safe."

"Humph!"

"Not one is lower in rank than a baronet; but of course, men like you and I, Mr. Broke, appreciate the real value of 'aving a 'andle to one's name. It is not worth anything, strictly speaking, but the world has yet to find that out; and when all is said, it does give you a feeling of security that whatever they may say or whatever they may do has the sanction, as it were, of their social position. I think it is good for my son to choose his acquaintances from among the 'ighest in the land. A man is known by the company he keeps. I am thankful to say my son has already found out the value of that adage."

"Humph!"

"You might say that we have coming to-morrow the *crème de la crème*, the real Vere de Vere, as it were. There is young Stufe, the eldest son of Lord Wool-Sacke, a fine example of pecuniary reward overtaking a humane and high-minded judge who never allowed wealth and position to interfere with his unfailing courtesy. There is also the eldest son of Lord Beeston. His father was ennobled for building a coffee tavern, in which a royal princess drank the first mug. Then there is young Treadwell, son of Lord

Kidderminster—carpets you know. Don't you think, Mr. Broke, my son has done well to collect such a very desirable set of young men?"

"Humph!"

At this point the proud father stopped. His volubility, touched with an intense excitement which had provoked a few liberties with his mother tongue, came suddenly to an end just as Broke had been driven by despair to the conclusion that it was never going to end at all. Mr. Breffit pulled himself up by a violent effort. He coughed in an uneasy fashion, and began to wriggle in his chair without any visible cause for such a proceeding. Broke regarded him with a stolid gravity. Now he was here he would hear the fellow out to the bitter end! After all, here was an illuminating sidelight on human nature. One hardly realized into what fantastic shapes the aspirations that might be said to be common to all men could be twisted by uneducated minds. Poor Breffit's astounding revelation of himself was not without value. It would be instructive to hear the fellow out.

"You must pardon me, Mr. Broke," said the old man in a voice that had now dropped to almost a whisper, "but I think the time is now come when, without impropriety, I can speak on a subject that has been in my mind for some little time past. Of course, sir, speaking as one man of the world to another, you will understand almost without my calling attention to the fact, that in these days every tub is allowed to stand on its own bottom, as it were, and that it is every man for himself."

"Humph!"

"I don't think that quite expresses what I mean, sir. What I meant to say is this: when a man gets to my time of life, and that life has been as successful as mine has been—I think I may make that admission to you, sir, without being considered boastful—he may see things in a different aspect from what he saw them when he was younger and not quite so well off."

"Humph!"

"You see, there is this son of mine, sir. He has had the

best upbringing that a young man can 'ave ; he mixes with the 'ighly placed ; he enjoys all the advantages of wealth ; not to mention the minor blessings of 'ealth and a sound constitution. And it has become a pet scheme of mine, Mr. Broke, my one remaining ambition, you might say, that before I die I shall see this boy of mine settled in life with a wife whose antecedents are unimpeachable and—er—to be quite frank with you, sir, who is capable of giving him a lift socially. It may seem a wild scheme to you, sir, but before I die I should like to see my son in a fair way to—er—found a family."

"Humph !"

The old man was exceeding all expectation.

"It may sound a bit inflated and presumptuous to you, I know, Mr. Broke ; but you must not forget that everybody 'as to 'ave a beginning. If I may say it without giving offence, sir, even the family of Broke 'ad to 'ave a beginning. And what I ask myself is this : why should not I, old Joe Breffit, now that I 'ave the ways and the means, all come by honestly, mind you, and in the sweat of my brow as it were, why should not I begin like anybody else ? When some of the fathers and the grandfathers of the young men who are coming to-morrow began life, sir, they were 'ardly better than I am myself. But look at them now. They are the *crème de la crème*, the real Vere de Vere. And I have lately come to ask myself, why in the course of time and the fullness, the name of Breffit should not rank as 'igh as does theirs to-day."

"Humph !"

"Those are my feelings, Mr. Broke. And I hope you will be patient with me, and not think I am trespassing—trespassing unduly upon your valuable time, because I have come to the conclusion that you, sir, are the man before all others who is in a position to help me."

"Humph !"

The surprised but not flattered Broke knitted his brows into a kind of fierce perplexity.

"I beg your pardon, Breffit, but I am afraid I don't understand what you are driving at."

"No, sir, I thought you might not. I will try to make myself a little more clear. You see, it is like this, Mr. Broke—I hope you will not think I am exceeding the bounds of good taste to mention a small matter of this kind—but speaking as one business man to another, are you aware that a few months ago Mrs. Broke did me the honour to accept a loan to the extent of some two thousand pounds? The matter is almost too trivial to mention. It was just in the ordinary way of business, you know; she wanted it, I believe, for some little private speculation, which I am sorry to say did not come off. In any case she borrowed it, sir; and as she has since told me that there is no immediate prospect of her being able to repay it, I feel, with great diffidence, you understand, sir, that I may be pardoned if I turn to you for a helping hand in this little matter that is so near my heart. Wheels within wheels, you know, sir, as the saying is."

Broke said "Humph" no more. His face assumed the startled expression which several times had appeared on it of late; every line in his figure denoted alarm.

"Impossible. She would not be such a fool."

Mr. Breffit smiled a far-off smile.

"I hold her IOU. I can easily produce it, sir, if you wish to see it."

Broke waved his hand petulantly; but half a groan escaped him. His unbelief was not so much a matter of incredulity as of disinclination.

"What—ah—do you—ah—propose to do?"

"I propose to do nothing, sir, of course. But if I may, I would like to make a suggestion. The scheme I would like to be allowed to propound would, I am sure, be to our common advantage. But first, sir, I must have your permission to speak out just what is in my mind."

"You have it," said Broke shortly.

"You will undertake not to be—er—offended by it, sir?"

"Of course."

Broke gave a grim eye to his agent. For the first time the idea dawned upon him, in all its completeness, what a cunning schemer this man Breffit really was. The supple and

servile adviser of twenty years, in many ways the friend, was now about to issue forth in his true character of the Jew-like usurer. He could afford to snap his fingers in his face now, he the man of wealth, to the client brought to beggary. He was about to grind him, no doubt.

"Well, sir, what I 'ave in my mind is this," said the old man, with the same circumlocution, the same odd nervousness of manner that Broke had noticed in him from the beginning of this interview. "Blood without money don't count for much nowadays, does it, sir? And money likes to 'ave blood to back it when it can get it, does it not, sir? Now, why should not you and I, who I might say are typical of the two sides, if you will pardon the freedom, enter into a little arrangement for our mutual benefit?"

"Why not?" said Broke the obtuse.

"I am glad to hear you say that, sir, I am indeed!" said Mr. Breffit, with an air of relief. "I felt sure, sir, you would see it in that light."

"What is your little arrangement, Breffit?"

"Well—er—you see, sir, I—er—want a wife for my son."

"In the circumstances that does not strike one as unnatural."

"I want you to help me, Mr. Broke."

"I—ah—have no qualifications as far as I am aware to be a matrimonial agent."

"You have daughters, sir."

"Six."

They looked at one another. Broke looked at Breffit with the candour and self-possession of sheer obtuseness. For the life of him he could not see what the fellow was driving at! Breffit looked at Broke with a weary, rather anxious expression. The power of delicate suggestion could no farther go. The hint was as broad as decency would well permit, yet the great man either could not or would not see it.

For once even Mr. Breffit was at a loss. He had an uneasy feeling that this matter was a little outside his milieu. A purely business transaction, the recovery of a debt, the terms of a tenancy, the conveyance of a lease, and he was prepared to revel in the facility and the felicity of his language. But

those gifts of expression did not help him here. Delicacy was called for, yet this man was as dense as a wall.

"Don't you take me, sir?" he said at last in desperation.

"I beg pardon, Breffit."

"Don't you understand me, sir?"

"I beg pardon," repeated Broke gravely.

Mr. Breffit was defeated. Surely it was hardly necessary to say in just so many words what was in one's mind. Was it usual to resort to such an extreme verbal precision in affairs of this peculiarly delicate kind? It was his first experience of them to be sure, but somehow he felt that a little margin should be permitted.

"You have daughters, sir."

"Six."

"And I have a son, sir."

"So I understand."

"Well, now, sir, do I not—er—begin to make myself clear?"

In his anxiety Mr. Breffit leaned forward with his hands on his knees.

"You spoke of a scheme, just now," said Broke patiently.

"That is my scheme, sir," said Mr. Breffit in a sudden burst of confidence.

"You speak in riddles, Breffit. I—ah—cannot make you out. I do not see what your son has got to do with it. Do you—ah—wish me to understand that Mrs. Broke borrowed this money of *him*? If that is the case, why—ah—not say so in as many words?"

Mr. Breffit ran his fingers through his sparse hair. How was it possible to be delicate with a man of this kind!

"It is not a question of the money, sir, altogether."

"If it is not a question of the money, I hardly know what you are talking about, Breffit," said Broke, becoming so bewildered that he was getting a little angry also. "Of course, you may depend upon it that I shall take the first opportunity of—ah—discharging the—ah—obligation Mrs. Broke is under to you. I hope there will be enough left over from the lease of No. 3 Broke Street to clear off that. In the

course of a week or two, Breffit, I—ah—trust you will be repaid.”

“Of course, sir—yes, yes—of course. But—er—that is not exactly what I mean. Really—er—that has little or nothing to do with it.”

“Breffit, I cannot understand you. What else have we been talking about? I certainly understood you to be propounding a scheme by which I—ah—could pay off the debt in a manner convenient to us both. You have not made it very clear, but I—ah—don’t doubt it is excellent. Your schemes in the way of business are generally excellent.”

“They are, I hope and trust, sir. But if you will pardon my saying it, I think you are labouring under a misapprehension. It is not a paltry little matter of a few hundreds of pounds to which I am referring now. We will leave that out of the question altogether. You have six daughters, and—er—I have one son, sir; and my son, sir, speaking plainly, is pretty well off at the present time and has this place in which to live. In confidence, Mr. Broke, I think it is only right to tell you that I have made over this house to him in my own lifetime, and, moreover, I allow him twenty thousand a year upon which to maintain it. And I may say this is no more than half of the fortune which will come to him at my decease. Still, what he has already should suffice for him to marry upon and lead the life of a gentleman. And should his wife object to my presence in this house, I being a simple and homely man, sir, and have always been so, like my father before me, am quite prepared to go back to the little house at Cuttisham where I have lived for forty years.”

With an impatience that was no longer to be restrained Broke rose from his chair. Old Breffit was so mysterious, so unintelligible that one would almost think his mind was giving way. Certainly he was beginning to show many signs of age. This was not the Breffit of the old days, whom he had been wont to regard as his right hand. This was not the far-seeing and astute man of business who, confining himself wholly to the affairs of his clients, had the knack of expressing himself in the fewest possible words. This was a new kind of Breffit altogether: a halting, faltering, fumbling, prosing,

nervously autobiographical Breffit; an uneasy, aspiring, much-too-familiar Breffit who gave himself airs. There could be no doubt that wealth was a curse to those who had not been bred to its enjoyment.

Broke could endure this farce no longer. He took up his hat and tapped his box-cloth leggings with the handle of his riding-crop.

"Good morning, Breffit."

His agent lifted a perspiring face up to him in the stress of a last appeal.

"Surely, sir, you *do* understand me?"

"Confound it all, my dear fellow, what is there to understand?"

"That I want my son to marry one of your daughters—I don't care which," Mr. Breffit blurted out with the sudden and dramatic brevity of sheer desperation.

Broke stood a minute in silence, but with mouth open wide and a face as purple as Mr. Breffit's own. Suddenly, and still without uttering a word, he crammed his hat on his head, swung upon his heel, and stalked out of the house so furiously that he nearly knocked down and trampled upon a very serious footman in the process.

CHAPTER XXV

IPHIGENIA

BROKE rode two miles at a brisk canter. And then, all of a sudden, and for no visible cause, he reined in his horse sharply and burst into a guffaw of laughter. The quality of this mirth was as strange as its manner. It had the hollowness of that which a ghost might shake out of its thin sides, if confronted with its own reflection in a mirror in the middle of the night. There was no apparent reason why at such a moment he should pause for amusement's sake, let alone to make it vocal; and the absence of motive lent a very irrational air to the proceeding.

It was not until the evening of that day that he could screw up his resolution to the point of mentioning to his wife the painful matter of her borrowing two thousand pounds from Mr. Breffit. The other consequences—the outcome, he supposed, of that rash act—he could not lay before himself. Events had been moving too fast for him lately. His powerfully balanced and superbly unemotional mental system was in danger of being shaken to its base if this sort of thing continued. There was only a numb ache in that sensitive portion of his being which rejoiced a fortnight ago in the possession of a son. And a sort of gangrene was overspreading that equally sensitive area that was dedicated to his great integrity. That Salmon business was a facer; but worse a hundred times, because of the hint of treachery implied in it, was this business of his wife stooping to borrow money behind his back, with but a faint prospect of repaying it. As for the use old Breffit had proposed to himself to make of it, that was hardly a theme for serious minds. It belonged to the region of *opera bouffe*.

He was shocked by his wife's lightness of tone when at last with many hums and haws he brought himself to refer to the subject. The borrowing of the money she admitted in as many words. She had been tempted to speculate on the Stock Exchange in the hope of doubling the sum ; she had not been successful ; and there the thing was—such was her habit of philosophy. She was perfectly calm about it ; not at all inclined to mingle her tears with the milk she had spilt.

“ With a bit of luck I could have returned the money and have been the richer by two thousand pounds, and no one would have been any the wiser. I have done it before ; but we are dead out of luck this year.”

“ I—ah—don't like to hear you talk like that, Jane. It is as though you—ah—hardly appreciate the principle involved. You should have first consulted me.”

Her sense of humour was too keen to enable her to keep the light of it out of her eyes.

“ I am afraid you—ah—treat the matter too lightly. You—ah—should never have done a thing like that without my knowledge.”

“ I hardly concede your right, my dear Edmund, to intervene in my purely private affairs.”

“ I—ah—think you will find that the law does.”

“ Has it never occurred to you, my dear, that to be perfectly literal with the law of England is to be out of date ? ”

“ I—ah—don't go into fine points. The fact should suffice that we are one in the sight of the law.”

“ Very well, Edmund, I grant it ; but I still arrogate to myself the right to forget the fact occasionally. Does the virtuous Mr. Breffit propose to adopt the rôle of Shylock ? ”

“ He does.”

“ He proposes to sell us up ? ”

“ No, he—ah—wants his pound of flesh more literally.”

Broke again suddenly broke forth into the guffaw he had checked his horse to employ. It burst out of him in just the same irrational fashion as in the country lane.

His wife was startled by it. She then saw that his eyes

were slightly bloodshot. In his face was the expression of grey weariness that had been first seen there so recently.

"We put ourselves in the power," he said, "of men like these and they do not hesitate to push their advantages home. I have had such an instance of the man's effrontery as you will hardly believe."

Mrs. Broke waited with a calm foreknowledge of what was coming. For accuracy of guessing she was famous.

"I—ah—don't know that it is worth while to tell you."

"You will be wise if you do."

"Very well. You may know that Breffit has put his son in Algernon's place with twenty thousand a year. Well, this morning he was kind enough to suggest that one of our girls—he—ah—says he don't mind which—should marry the fellow."

Again the laugh rang hollow. His wife looked at him with an expression that was not unkind.

"I never guessed what an old ruffian he was until I saw him this morning in poor Algy's house. He is completely changed. He is like the rest of his tribe : money poisons him. He was—ah—good enough to put me on an equality with himself. *Noblesse oblige*, you know, Mr. Broke. I could hardly stand it ; I—ah—nearly laughed in his face."

He passed his hands through his hair wearily.

"And how did you answer him, Edmund ?"

"I—ah—I—ah—I *bolted*."

"I am afraid you did not err on the side of politeness, my dear."

"The fellow got as much as he deserved—more !"

"Twenty thousand a year," she repeated wistfully.

"It makes it no better—worse if anything. It's a bribe."

"There is one phase of this matter, Edmund, of which you force me to remind you. A recent event has ruined us."

"In a sense I—ah—suppose it has."

"We must leave Covenden, or consent to be sold up."

"Surely we cannot be so far gone as that."

His voice had changed.

"You will find it to be as I say. And I want you to bear in mind that Mr. Breffit is our largest creditor."

"But you forget that we are selling the lease of No. 3. Surely that will help us to hold on a bit."

"Edmund, do not deceive yourself. We are compromised far more deeply than I think you realize. Mr. Breffit's purse and his goodwill have been propping us up for several years. You are not so closely in touch with our affairs as I am; we are much farther gone than you think. For the last two years Mr. Breffit has only had to say the word for Covenden to be sold over our heads."

"Why has the fellow not said it, then?"

"I will give you no more than two reasons. The first was his friendship for us and our hopes of Billy. The second I will leave you to guess for yourself."

"Impossible; I—ah—refuse to believe it. The fellow may be cunning, but he cannot have had the—ah—folly, the—ah—effrontery to play such a game as that. The man must be mad."

"Not mad, Edmund. If madness there is in the matter it lies elsewhere. The man simply belongs to the age in which he lives."

"Faugh! You disgust me."

"Again, Edmund, for the thousandth time it is my disagreeable duty to remind you that this is not the age of the Plantagenets. People like you are as obsolete as the feudal baron. We are democrats all, living in the golden age of the people. We must be prepared to offer up our Iphigenia on their altars."

"I don't know how you can talk so," said Broke hoarsely. "It's blasphemous."

"We are face to face with the bitter truth. When Mr. Breffit made that suggestion this morning he showed his hand. He could have added, and probably would have done so had you waited to hear, 'Refuse me this and I make an end of you!'"

"You think that!"

"I am perfectly convinced of it."

Broke's chest sank; speech seemed to fail him. He was compelled to take what his wife said for granted. It had long been her privilege to navigate the wretched vessel

through these vast and deep seas of an infinite complexity. The requisite patience and subtlety were beyond him. Thus when the cold assurance fell from her lips he accepted it with a faith that was unquestioning. The blow shook him to the roots.

“ I would suggest Delia.”

His wife’s brevity was so pregnant that he was startled rather painfully.

He shaped a word with his lips. So shaken was he that for the moment he had lost the power of speech.

“ The matter is one of life or death. Shylock insists on his pound of flesh. He has only to say the word and we are houseless and homeless. Covenden will probably become a shooting-box for his son.”

Implacably she watched the barb sink. The capacity to act purely from considerations of expedience was standing her in good stead at this moment. She was designedly ruthless ; half-measures would be fatal. His pride must be nailed to the tree.

“ I suggest Delia.”

“ You don’t know what you are saying, woman.”

“ You have six girls, but only one Covenden.”

“ Ugh ! shocking young cad.”

“ So I believe. The heathen deities are not nice.”

“ I cannot do it, I will not do it. The idea revolts me.”

Broke rose from his chair and strode about the room. She watched his grotesque figure as it lurched up and down the carpet. There was a wan smile on her lips.

“ Why Delia ? ”

He stopped suddenly and faced her fiercely as he asked the question.

“ She is the youngest.”

“ That is not a reason. Or if it is a reason it points the other way.”

“ She is not quite so dependable as the others.”

“ What do you mean ? ”

A fortnight ago he would not have brought himself to put such a question. But a miracle has only to happen to us once to change us. The act of his son had defaced for ever

the beautifully drawn chart of human behaviour by which he had regulated his own thoughts. Dating from that catastrophe the unhappy father had not bearings by which to go.

“ Her tutor has done her no good, I regret to say.”

“ Tutor, tutor ! What do you mean ? ”

“ I refer to the young man Emma sent to coach her. The wretched child has fallen violently in love.”

A fortnight ago he would probably have called his wife a fool for allowing herself to hold such a theory in regard to one of their offspring. Now he could only walk up and down the room with another nerve laid bare. The world in which he had dwelt for sixty more or less peaceful years was falling in upon him.

While he continued to stagger up and down the room his wife withdrew her gaze from that unhappy figure and sat down to write a letter. It was a brief note of invitation to Mr. Breffit *filis* ; it sought the pleasure of his company at luncheon at two o'clock on the Saturday following.

She asked Broke to read it.

When he returned the note to her she was oppressed by the coldness of his hands.

“ Give me a bit of time,” he said in a voice she could hardly hear. “ Time to think it over. Mustn't decide to-night. No need to decide to-night.”

“ Yes, Edmund, to-night. We must make up our minds here and now. We can then put it away from us once and for all.”

“ Yes, it's right, I dare say. Always right, Jane, in these things. But I am not equal to it to-night. Save it until to-morrow ; our heads will be clearer.”

“ No, Edmund, let us have done with it to-night. It is the only way. We spare ourselves if we do.”

Suddenly the tormented man broke out in his more strident self.

“ You shall not do it ; my God, you shall not ! ”

He tore the letter out of his wife's fingers, crushed it and flung it in the grate.

She confronted him steadily.

“ You seal your doom, Edmund.”

“ Let them do their worst, and curse them ! ”

He walked out of the room, the door slamming behind him. A little afterwards a second door slammed far away in the house. By the dull and heavy clang Mrs. Broke knew it to be the front door of the entrance hall. She looked at the clock. It was five minutes to two of the May morning.

Very deliberately she sat down again at the writing-table and re-wrote word for word the invitation to Mr. Breffit *filis*. She put the letter in the post-box in the hall ; and then, proceeding to the housekeeper's room, deserted hours ago, she struck a match, lit a spirit lamp, and made herself a cup of tea.

CHAPTER XXVI

IN WHICH TWO MATRIMONIAL RICHMONDS TAKE THE FIELD

THREE days later the evening papers were selling in London like hot cakes with the aid of a spicy bill of fare. Every patron of tube and omnibus, every habitu  of the A rated Bread shop and chop house of the City was bidden to the banquet by great capital letters, as black as ink could make them. There was no doubt as to the stimulating nature of the fare. "A Thames Bubble—Collapse of the Thames Valley Goldfields Syndicate—Meeting of Shareholders—Stormy Scenes—Remarkable Speech of a Director."

Here, indeed, was food for the people.

Broke's eloquence had been reported carefully. To be sure, his periods owed something to the art of the journalist. But nothing could rob his language of its special quality; and the personality of the speaker was there in all its *na vet *. As one organ of opinion declared in a leading article upon the subject: "The quaint spectacle of a guinea pig waving aloft the banner of purity, and calling down fire from heaven upon the heads of his kind, was enough to make the British public sit up and purr." Indeed, the inspirer of this simile awoke to find himself more famous than he had ever been in his life before. The illustrated papers came out with pictures of him in varying forms and stages of the libellous. *Society Snapshots* had a short biography by One Who had Fagged for Him at Eton; and *Classy Cuttings* revealed to its readers the kind of shaving-soap he used, and settled forever the vexed question whether he wore his hair parted in the middle or at the side.

It was May now, and the deepest gloom seemed to have settled on the family of Covenden. There was to be no London season for them this year, with the exception of Delia, who had been condemned to spend a fortnight at Grosvenor Street with Aunt Emma in order that she might be presented, and who would, as she vowed with inexpressibly bitter tears, have preferred to stay at home. Not that she was any happier at home. And her forlorn look had been commented upon by other people besides her Uncle Charles.

Too well did her sisters know the cause of her unhappiness. But they had not a spark of pity for her ; indeed, they were filled with scorn. The reflection upon themselves was by far the most grievous they had ever had to bear. They could hardly believe it of one who in external things resembled them one and all so closely ; in one whom nature must have designed to be one of themselves. They could only ascribe it to her having those films to her eyes, and those lashes that curled up at the ends. They were humbly grateful that they were without them, now that they saw what the possession of them meant. If, as they shrewdly supposed, such things as films and curling eyelashes were allowed by judges to be marks of beauty, as were pricked ears and bowed legs in a terrier puppy, they began to see the force of that adage with which they were wont to console themselves : that if you were beautiful it was very difficult to be good. Not that in their opinion their youngest sister was any less plain than anybody else.

In any case they remained inflexible. She was sent to Coventry for an indefinite period, and it was only after Joan had taken a whole day to think the matter over that she was allowed to retain her privileges in regard to their common room.

"It is only because she is such a child," said that justiciary, delivering judgment before the court. "If it were not for that, this room should be forbidden her."

A slight sigh of relief was heard to pass round the assembly, and Harriet rose hurriedly to quit it lest anybody should see there were tears in her eyes.

The same Spartan justice was rendered to Billy. It tore

their hearts, but a command of their father was their highest conception of law. So obedient were they to his mandate, that not only did they refrain from mentioning the name of their brother in his presence, but by a tacit consent it was banished in their private intercourse. Delia, it is true, had so far forgotten herself as once to speak of him, but such terrible freezing glances had she received for her pains, that she was not likely to venture to do so again. Their mother also had spoken of him several times in their hearing, but their perfect loyalty to their father forbade their taking pleasure in these occasions.

Their mother, indeed, spoke to them freely of Billy, and even said it would give her pleasure if they made a pilgrimage to the cottage on the hill to see his wife. It would have given them pleasure, too, because whatever their father's mandate, the fact remained that Billy was Billy still. Even the mightiest law-giver cannot induce oblivion of what once has been. And again they had a natural curiosity to look upon the creature who had wrought their brother's ruin. Extravagant pictures were in their minds. They would have paid their shillings to behold her with even greater eagerness than those they paid to look at the strange things in the menagerie that came every year to Cuttisham Fair. Less uncompromising types of conscience might have found an excuse to gaze upon this fearsome creature, but their father's ukase must be obeyed not in the letter merely but in the spirit.

Delia returned from London less happy if possible than when she went away. To every reasonable and right-thinking girl the experiences crowded into that fortnight would at least have been exciting. But as Aunt Emma wrote to inform her mother as soon as she had returned to her home, she had been wholly uninspired by dances and parties, and even by the Drawing-room itself.

Although Delia seemed not a bit happier for her glimpse of the London season there was one alteration in her which her sisters allowed was for the better. She no longer permitted herself that undue, that licentious indulgence in tears. They did not lie so near the surface ; quite a chance

shot would no longer call them forth ; while the absence of a red inflammation about her eyelids proved that she did not spend so many hours in her bedroom in private weepings. It could at least be said that she had brought back a keener sense of decency from the London season.

One day a stranger came to luncheon, a man whom they could not remember to have seen before. He was young and rather handsome in a somewhat florid style ; and he was extremely well dressed. Mr. Breffit was his name, and their father, as so often was the case with him now, hardly said a word throughout the meal. Their mother, as was her custom when a guest was present, was in very good form, and oddly enough she made one or two quite flattering references to Delia, who had the strange man for her neighbour, and seemed to insist in her delicate way that Delia should converse with him. Their surprise and consternation were great. Never before had one of them, not even Joan herself, been singled out for public notice by the august president of their destinies. And Delia of all people !

It was their mother, however, who had to sustain the chief share in the conversation. Without her there would hardly have been any at all. Delia, in spite of her new honours, seldom allowed herself to go beyond the limits imposed by her habitual " yes " and " no." Mr. Breffit also did not seem to be gifted with powers of any remarkable range. He confined himself mainly to one topic : did they know So-and-so of Such-and-such ? He had just been spending a fortnight at Such-and-such. The number of houses at which he was a welcome guest was wonderful.

" You were at Cambridge, were you not ? "

" Oh, yes ; three years at Trinity, mostly wasted, I am afraid."

" Ah, Mr. Breffit, you are too modest. Did you ever meet a young man of the name of Porter of your college ? He was, I believe, about your time."

" Porter—Porter," Mr. Breffit knitted his brow. " I seem to know the name, but Trinity, of course, is not a small college. I believe there was a man of that name who rowed bow in the Hall boat."

"He comes from Cuttisham. His father is a bookseller there."

"I don't seem to have met him," said Mr. Breffit.

"As he came from this neighbourhood, and he went to the same college about your time, I thought you might perhaps. I am interested in him because my sister-in-law, Lady Bosket, predicts great things of him."

"Ah, yes, I remember, there was a man of that name; a harmless, quiet, reading man, although I can hardly recall him."

"I should think he would be. But I gather that you did not know him very intimately."

"Not very."

To the significance of his tone Mr. Breffit added a gesture of polite deprecation.

"A recluse probably?"

"I really don't know, but I should say he was."

"Was he well thought of in the college?"

"I really don't know, but I should say not."

"You surprise one. My sister-in-law will be disappointed if he does not turn out well."

"It is quite probable he was clever. Outsiders mostly are."

Her object achieved, Mrs. Broke changed the subject.

"How is your father?"

The young man was disconcerted a little by the unexpectedness of the question.

"I have not had the pleasure of seeing him for quite a long time," she said, to soften a certain awkwardness in the pause.

"I was not aware that you knew him," said Mr. Breffit, measuring his hostess with a wary eye.

"He has been a particular friend of Mr. Broke's for thirty years."

"He is quite well, thank you," said the young man coolly.

He had made up his mind already that he had never been so bored in his life. He supposed that old families were very well in their way, but if this ménage was a fair average specimen of what they were in general, long might he be

spared from contact with them! To begin with, the place itself seemed to smell of about three centuries behind the present. The old-world atmosphere was doubtless excellent, but he was not sure that he would not prefer to dispense with a few links in his pedigree and rub along without it. There was the pompous overbearing old bird of a father at the far end of the mahogany, who had hardly a word to throw to a dog, but gobbled beef and swilled ale, a kind of combination of a butcher and a farmer, with a great red face and a nose like a handle on a door. Then there were half a dozen girls, whom he took to be the daughters of the house, without exception the ugliest set of women he had ever seen in his life. They were all nose and elbow. They, too, seldom opened their mouths, except for the purposes of the table, which to do them justice they did with some effect. One of them sat beside him, and when he tried to talk to her she said "yes" and "no." The mother, however, was a bit better. You would not exactly call her a beauty, but she was by way of being rather agreeable, although she had a foolish habit of asking questions.

Before the luncheon itself, however, all these things paled. Speaking out of a moderately ripe experience, young Mr. Breffit could truthfully say it was the very worst luncheon to which he had ever sat down. He might have been back at his private school. Hardly a decent salad, tough, under-done mutton, over-done beef, ale only fit for harvesters and claret only fit for the pigs. The servants too seemed as uppish as the devil, and as slow as a funeral. It was a luncheon of which one would have thought anybody would have been ashamed. If this was what being before the Conquest meant, he thanked Heaven that he was rather more modern.

The young man was in this uncomfortable state of mind, when two men he had never seen before entered the room. One was an oldish, rather grotesque little man, in shabby tweeds and cloth gaiters, with a straw in his mouth. He conveyed the impression that he was a groom, rather down on his luck, who was looking for a job. The impression was confirmed when you noticed how bleared were his eyes and

how swollen was his nose. Drink had been his downfall, there could be no doubt about that.

The man who came with him was also a queer-looking fish. He was a youngish man, thirty-five or so, who looked far older than his years, with an earnest and perplexed yet very weary expression. He was very pale and thin and high in the shoulders, his peaked face had an anxious look upon it, and was subject to grotesque nervous contortions. He followed on the heels of the drunken groom with the straw, and Mrs. Broke beckoning to him, he was good enough to come and sit near Mr. Breffit, who with the insight into men and things that had long been a source of pride to its possessor, had set him down at once as the local curate.

"I have brought Harry," said the man with the straw in a hoarse loud voice. "We should ha' stayed over at the Court, only their whisky is so poisonous. Last time I said never again; besides, Harry wanted to come and see you. And how's my little cockyoly birds? All quite well, thank you, Uncle Charles, and hope you are the same—what?"

The funny old bird took a seat in the midst of the girls some distance away, rather to the relief of young Mr. Breffit, who, however, noted with envy that the old fool of a butler came forward with far more alacrity than he had yet shown, with a jar of whisky and a syphon of soda water. Groom or no groom the man with the straw was devilish lucky to be able to escape the ale and claret in that manner.

In the meantime the young-old man was beaming with anxious gravity upon his hostess. It was a stereotyped and conventional gesture, and he performed it with a dogged solemnity as of one doing his duty.

"Charmed to see you about again, Harry," said Mrs. Broke, with an affectionate smile accompanied by a most motherly tone. "How is the poor dear chest? Is it two still, or do you now pin your faith to one?"

"One and a bit," said Harry in a wheezy whisper.

"I congratulate you on the bit. How tenacious of you. To my knowledge you have held on to that bit for the last ten years."

"I want to do the right thing," said the young-old man in

a whisper wheezier than ever. "They tell me it will be inconvenient if I give up, so I am doing what I can to stay on."

"Then that is why you wintered at Davos? What a devotion to duty!"

"His vicar must think a lot of him if he sent him to Davos," his neighbour made the comment to himself.

"Do you think so?" said the young-old man. "I always try to do the right thing."

"My dear Harry, why assure one of that? Everybody knows it. One never thinks of you without recalling poor dear Nelson's phrase about 'England expects.'"

Mrs. Broke beamed upon the young-old man. A tinge of colour mottled his wan cheeks and he smiled faintly.

"I think duty is so beautiful," Mrs. Broke went on. "Without its existence would indeed be hollow. One wonders, Harry, that more people have not dedicated their lives to it as you have done. We should be a happier, a healthier, a more stable race."

"Harry is the happiest, healthiest, and most stable devil I ever saw," said Lord Bosket at the other end of the table in an aside to Broke.

"Surely he can't last long?"

"I don't know; he's a queer bird. For the last ten years everybody has said he can't last long, but here he is still drinkin' draught stout and playin' patience. He wheezes a bit more than he did in Mary's time, but he still hangs on. And I think he will as long as he makes up his mind to it. I never saw such a feller for makin' up his mind."

"I should want to give in if I was like that."

"Oh, I dare say he does. But his people think he ought to hang on as long as he can to shut Algy out. They want him to marry again as Mary didn't come off. I shouldn't be surprised if that's what has brought him here now. But whoever he marries she won't have to wait long to be a dowager."

Broke was sunk in thought for a minute, and then he said: "I—ah—don't fancy a fellow like that for one of our girls. It doesn't seem right to me. Does Jane know?"

"Of course she does. Catch her missing a chance."

Mrs. Broke was even yet dilating to the Duke of Wimbledon on the sacred character of duty. That hollow-cheeked and weary-eyed peer nodded his head slowly in response at automatic intervals. Plainly he took the responsibilities this life conferred upon him with a becoming seriousness. They appeared to begin and end in a doing of the right thing. Every act he performed was marked out according to that convention. His anxiety to do the right thing was stamped on every line of his worn face. His manner was a compliment to all present ; his desire to give satisfaction was so immense. His countenance might be stamped with every sign of affliction, but it was far from being reflected in his animated courtesy.

After having discussed with his hostess for ten minutes the sacred character of duty, it was in the pursuit of his usual scheme of conduct that he turned to the young man by his side, with whom he had not as yet exchanged a word.

"Awfully nice day," he said in his wheeziest whisper.

"U-u-m-m ?"

Mr. Breffit made a sound like a bee humming. He had heard what his neighbour had said perfectly well, but he was not in a mood to engage in a discussion of the weather with the local curate.

"Awfully nice day," his neighbour repeated gently.

"Very."

"Do you play golf ?"

"Do I play golf ? Yes. Do you ?"

"No, I do not."

"Hunt ?"

"No, I do not."

"Shoot ?"

"No, I do not ?"

"Cricket ?"

"No, I do not."

"Anything you do do ?"

"I like a game of patience."

"You like a game of patience. Yes, I dare say."

Mr. Breffit turned his back abruptly on his neighbour, and beckoned to the butler.

“Get me another glass of beer, will you?”

The young-old man turned his anxious face to the butler.

“Do you happen,” he said ingratiatingly, “to have brown stout on draught?”

“We have brown stout, your grace, on draught, or we have it bottled.”

“Do you mind getting me a little of the draught? And do you mind bringing it with a bit of froth on it? I like a bit of froth.”

“Thank you, your grace.”

Your grace! What did the old fool mean? Mr. Breffit asked himself. He turned to the daughter of the house who sat at his left hand.

“I say,” he said in an anxious whisper, “who is the sportsman on my right?”

“The Duke of Wimbledon.”

Young Mr. Breffit was rather taken aback. It didn't seem quite fair to dump a real live duke down beside one, and never to let one know. He gave the noble valetudinarian a nudge.

“I say, Duke, I suppose you would know my friend Shovehalfpenny, son, you know, of Lord Coddam?”

Yes, the Duke had the pleasure of knowing Shovehalfpenny, also his father, Lord Coddam. That was luck; he had got away in good style; he would now proceed to make the pace a bit. Did he know Lord Huffey? Yes, the Duke knew Huffey. With that further success young Mr. Breffit proceeded to cut out the work.

Huffey, Huffey's place, and Huffey's people were passed under review for the delectation of the weary young-old man, who listened with grave attention and nodded his head, and said “Yes!” and “Oh, yes!” at intervals, although he had not the least interest in Huffey, and had only met him twice in his life. The meek and inoffensive victim, who had never so much as harmed a fly in all the course of his days, bore the remorseless Mr. Breffit with the stoicism bred of long affliction. He listened with his head bent slightly forward that he might not miss a word, and his thin chest

and pale blue chin protruded in polite earnestness towards his pitiless tormentor. Balzac, when he fashioned his phrase about genius, might with equal truth have rendered it, "La patience angelique des ducs."

Secure in the impression he was making—it was clear that his auditor was greatly interested—the young man rose in the intoxication of success to more ambitious flights. His old father had shown a true instinct when he had purchased Tufton. This was where the little place came in.

"You must come and see us at Tufton, Duke. You must really."

The gentle bundle of nerves seemed almost to struggle a weak instant in the young man's grasp.

"Tufton," he murmured dreamily. "You live at Tufton?"

"Don't you know?" The tone of expostulation was delicate. "It is ours now. My father took it off the hands of one of his oldest friends, Lord Algernon Raynes. You know poor old Algy, of course. Everybody knows poor old Algy. You must have heard, everybody's heard, of what a frightful cropper the poor old fellow came over that dashing little widow he met at Monte Carlo. His people are awfully cut up; awfully rough on them, as they are not overburdened with the things of this world, as I dare say you know. There is no saying what would have happened had not a friend of the family come forward in the nick of time to take Tufton off their hands."

The young man's neighbour turned to take a fuller look at him.

"You have bought Tufton," he said. "Is your name Breffit, may I ask?"

There was a measure of embarrassment in the head of the Raynes family when he put this question, but at least it was no greater than that with which Mr. Breffit answered it.

"Ye—es," he said irresolutely. "Hamilton Breffit is my name."

A strange weary smile flickered an instant in the pale face of his victim.

"It was good of you to come to our aid," he said earnestly.

“ I am sure we are deeply sensible of your father’s kindness ; we might have had it on our hands a long time had he not made his offer. I dare say, if we could have afforded to wait, more might have been made of it, but, nevertheless, I am sure we are grateful to your father for his promptness.”

Young Mr. Breffit was overcome by a tremendous pang right in the centre of the brain. What a toss he had taken ; he was completely knocked out ! Why had he not had the sense to remember that he was talking to the head of the family ? It was a great pity that he had not left him at the local curate.

Half an hour later, as the young man swung down the drive at a furious pace, he swore a great oath that all the king’s horses and all the king’s men should not induce him to set foot in that house again.

CHAPTER XXVII

PROVIDES OPPORTUNITY FOR A LITTLE MORAL TEACHING

ONE morning Mrs. Broke summoned Delia to her room. A large basket laden with flowers was on the table.

"I want you to take these to the cottage on the hill. Be careful. There are eggs underneath."

An implicit obedience being as much an instinct with Delia as with her sisters she did not pause to allow questions to surge on her lips. She took the basket and set forth.

"That child looks wretchedly ill," was her mother's comment as she closed the door. "It seems as though this little hothouse of a world of ours is getting too high a temperature."

To Delia her mother's command seemed to break down the barrier that had been raised between them and the dwellers in that sinister little cottage. But she would have been much easier in her mind had the command been her father's. Yet for the moment she was dominated by an overpowering curiosity. She had an almost morbid desire to look upon the creature who had wrought her brother's ruin.

Still, the sense she had that obedience to her mother meant disloyalty to her father rendered her unhappy as she went. She knew that her parents did not always see eye to eye; and in the present case the divergence of their points of view was very sharp. For that reason she hoped she would not meet her father now. She did not take the short way, therefore, through the home farm, lest she should meet him there, but went the longer road, a difference of half a mile:

The fear of detection gave way to a feeling of guilt when

the cottage came into sight. Indeed, she had a sense of disloyalty to him she had always worshipped, and was not sure as she lifted the latch of the cottage gate that she would not have preferred to be found out. She despised herself for having come the longer way to avoid him. However, hardly had she set foot on the narrow path, brave on either side with bright flowers, when she was startled by strong, familiar tones coming through the open door of the cottage. Almost before she could recognize them a beloved form filled the doorway. It was Billy.

At the sight of him, with the bright sun weaving a halo round that handsome head, all nicely calculated forms of conduct vanished.

"Hallo, it is little Del!" he cried, with the happy shout of a boy. "Little Del has come to see us. You dear kid; how ripping of you!"

He made a proprietary grab at her as when he used to romp with them of old. With one hand he caught and held her, and with the other tore the basket from her.

"They are eggs," she had the presence of mind to gasp.

"You dear kid!"

He planted a kiss upon the apple-coloured cheek.

She struggled to keep the tears from showing in her eyes. He had not changed in the least. Billy was Billy still: the same laughing, fearless, careless, insolently tender brother whom they all adored. He was the same brother who had rolled them in hay a thousand times; who had chased them round the farm; who had made them hide from him in barns and corn cribs, lofts and mangers, and the strangest places; who had given them a lead over the stiffest fences, and whose line they were prepared to follow to the world's end.

"Come on in," he said, squeezing her small body, and half carrying, half dragging her through the door of the cottage, just in the way that he used to convey them as his prisoners two at a time in those strong arms of old. "My old little girl must see my new little girl, eh?"

In this uncompromising fashion the rather frightened if joyously excited Delia was taken to view the fierce creature.

“Here she is,” cried Billy. “Isn’t she a little beauty? Kiss her, Del, and tell her that she is.”

The two girls met one another irresolutely with their eyes. They were both a little afraid, both a little bewildered; they were as shy and distrustful as two strange kittens on the same hearthrug. But Alice was the first to yield. She was even timider than Delia; and she was soon shrinking from the honest gaze of Billy’s sister, who was looking in vain for a trace of the wicked monster she had expected to find. Alice coloured vividly and her eyes fell; but in almost the same instant, Delia sprang towards her with outstretched arms.

The old woman, the aunt, stood watching from far back against the wall. There was a kind of reticence in Billy also. But there was also gratitude. Delia’s act had appealed to him. And the sight of his young wife and his young sister in one another’s arms seemed to increase the debt he owed his mother. He guessed that Delia’s presence was due to her.

Without his mother he saw that things might have gone much harder with Alice. She it was who had installed her and her aunt in that pleasant place. Also she had visited her once or twice, he had learned; had furnished the cottage; had given her money, and had generally looked after her. Also she had brought Maud Wayling there, and Maud herself had come there once or twice of her own accord. Indeed, from the eager inquiries that he made he learned that his mother and Maud had been more than kind. But with all his wish to do so, he could not learn that one of his sisters had taken the least interest in his wife. He felt that more keenly than he cared to own. Not once had they been to the cottage. That they were acting under orders from their father was the only solace that could atone for their neglect.

The letter he had received from his father he had half expected. Instinctively he had known the sort of man his father was if you should have the misfortune to cross him. Practically he was done for in England; he had given up the service already. His means would not permit him to follow a military calling and to keep a wife as well. Two hundred pounds a year!

He had already made up his mind that the best thing he could do was to go out to the colonies for a year or two. He could not stand the life of a pauper in England, with all his friends giving him the cold shoulder. No ; South Africa was the place, so he had heard. There was said to be a big future for that country and any amount of money to be made.

The desire uppermost in his mind was to dispense altogether with his father's bounty. That was where the shoe pinched at present ; had he had anything of his own on which to keep a wife he would have gone barefoot rather than accept a penny. His ponies had gone already to cover what he owed, and you could hardly say they had been successful in their object.

It made him groan to think that he must accept his father's bounty for his little girl. However, it would not be for long. Still, she had been cut up dreadfully over his plan ; she could hardly be got to see things in the light in which he saw them himself. She was sure they could exist without his having to go thousands of miles away to earn money. To her, poor little kid ! two hundred a year was princely, especially with a cottage to live in rent free. But she was brave. His absence would try her bitterly ; but she was prepared to endure it if he really felt that he must go.

To-morrow he must leave her. He was sure it would not be for long. He had tried to comfort her with the promise that if he had the least bit of luck his first act would be to return for her and her aunt. Like his mother, he had a vein of cheery optimism, a resolute looking at the right side of a thing that had generally carried him through. When it was necessary he was not without a certain stoicism of spirit, after the fashion of his kind.

Delia's coming there that morning had given him enormous pleasure. He had been afraid that aunt and niece would be left without friends. Of course, there was his mother, who had already behaved so splendidly ; but in his heart he shared the feeling of his sisters in regard to her. Whatever she might say or do you were never quite sure of the dear

old mummy. Somehow you never quite knew what her little game really was.

"You could not have come at a better time, Del," he said in the old frank way. "I am going away to-morrow; and I want you to be good to my little girl. Promise me you will. You see, she might get rather lonely if nobody comes to see her while I am away."

Delia made the promise. It was impossible to refuse; although even as she made it she knew it was an act of open disloyalty to her father, and that wild horses would not drag her sisters to that cottage door. But in the circumstances she felt powerless. And his young wife was very sweet and beautiful.

When she learned that her brother was going to leave England the next day, in spite of all her newly-acquired self-control, the sudden tears welled up.

"Oh!" she said, with a pang of overmastering bitterness.

The delicate-looking wife had her tears under better control, but it seemed to Delia that in her eyes was something worse. There was a look in them which was to haunt her for many a day.

"Oh, Billy! How can you leave her? If she were mine I should want her to stay with me always and always."

"Don't talk like that, little kid." There was something in his tone she had never heard in it before. "You mustn't talk like that, you know."

"I feel I must," said Delia. "It is all too cruel. Oh, how can you, Billy!"

"Drop it, little kid!" It was almost as if the simple words had struck him. "I hardly know how I can myself. But when you've got to do a thing you've jolly well got to do it, whether you can or you can't."

Suddenly he reassumed his laughing, careless ease.

"You young beggar. What do you mean by catechizing me like this? What do you mean by it, eh? I shall have to box your young ears, you know, if you get so coxey. But we are getting quite a woman now, aren't we? We shall be falling in love next."

Billy was no observer, therefore the swift change his light

words provoked in the face of his young sister passed without a challenge.

"Why, hang it all!" he cried in the stress of sudden recollection, "you haven't spoken to auntie yet."

Gaily he drew the old woman forward from her hiding-place at the back of the room. Although it was to be supposed that Delia would hardly have scared a butterfly, Miss Sparrow was very much afraid of her. Indeed, she was so timid that she could hardly speak a word, but she was able to make a curtsy the like of which Delia had never seen before.

Delia found herself regarding the shrinking face so pale and unhappy, with the same wonder and irresolution as she had regarded Alice. And in spite of the disparity in their years, she felt that sudden impulse which had caused her to take the young girl in her arms. In the case of this old woman she found that she had done the same thing.

"Will you tell my mother and the girls that I am going back to town to-night?" said Billy, as Delia prepared to take her leave with the empty basket in her hand. "Tell them to come up here this afternoon. I should like to see them before I go; there is no saying when we shall meet again. And I had better say good-bye to you, little kid, here now. I always knew you were a good little sort. Not much of you, eh? but what there is, is solid gold, eh, little Miss Muffett? And now for the very nicest kiss you have got. What a cold cheek you have got, little kid. And not so rosy as it was, by Jove. You must buck up, you know. Mustn't sit so hard at those books, eh? One more for luck; and then off with you—God knows when we shall see one another again!"

He took Delia's hands in his own and looked at her with all the old beguiling tenderness.

With his last kiss upon her cheek Delia hastened into the open air. The fear was upon her that she would break down before his beautiful fragile wife who was so brave. She ran into the sensuous air of May, heavy and languorous with the sun and the almost intolerable music of birds. She never dared to stay her headlong flight until the wood and the

hill and the little cottage nestling beneath them were far away.

Tears would have been a relief now, but the power to shed them had gone from her. A cruel rigor had fastened on her throat; her brain was like a ball of fire. And yet its substance was so heavy that it was like a piece of clay. She even made an effort to weep now; but she could not do so.

She went straight to her mother with the empty basket and her tragic face and gave Billy's message. The barrier of awe and distrust of her mother fell down an instant in the pitch of desperation while she said:

"He is going away from England to-morrow. He is going to leave his wife; and it is because of his father. He did not tell me so, but I know it is—oh! I know it is."

Mrs. Broke regarded her youngest daughter with an odd serenity. She read the horror and the sorrow that were written so poignantly on her face; she listened with calm patience to her wild words, and replied to them with the melancholy of a judge pronouncing a sentence.

"Yes, Delia, it is because of his father. It must be a lesson to you all."

As she spoke these words, her eyes seemed to dilate in a blaze of meaning, somewhat in the manner of that fabulous jewel which turned the hearts of all who gazed upon its lustre into a block of stone. But by now Delia was in no condition to heed, and the analogy between her brother's case and her own, which her mother had intended to strike home, had not the power to pierce her.

"It is cruel, it is unjust!" she cried, transfigured by her grief. "Alice is so sweet and beautiful and good! It is cruel, it is wicked to make her suffer!"

Her mother was astonished. Delia was positively the last creature in the world of whom such an outburst was to be expected. It made an unwelcome precedent in the history of her daughters' lives. And this child, too, the one with the least initiative, the least force of character!

"Delia, I must ask you to be silent."

"Billy has resigned his commission." she went on, with a

dreary wildness. "He is giving up everything; he is leaving his wife. He is——"

"Delia, you can go."

She could not escape the dominating glance, and the old fear of that implacable will reasserted itself. It strangled the words on her lips. With a little cry of horror she ran from the room.

CHAPTER XXVIII

PARIAH IN THE NAME OF LOVE

IT was not until the afternoon that Delia was able to find her five sisters. They had taken luncheon at an agricultural show. Ultimately she found them assembled in full conclave over the teacups in their common room, talking horses and frocks. As soon as she entered she cried :

“ Billy is at the cottage, and he wants to see you all to say good-bye. He is leaving England to-morrow.”

The first glances her sisters gave her were those of bewilderment : her words were so wild, her voice so unsteady. Joan was the first to recover herself ; or overcome perhaps by so momentous a crisis, they did not trust themselves to hold thoughts of their own, until they had received the sanction of their natural leader.

Even Joan shivered a little, but her mouth was very set, and her face reminded them strangely of their father's at the moment he had issued the decree.

“ You must leave this room, Delia, until we have taken tea. We cannot submit to disobedience from you.”

“ Mother sent me,” said Delia, with wild defiance.

“ You know that father had forbidden his name to be mentioned.”

“ In his presence,” said Delia wildly.

“ We should act when he is absent just as though he were present. If you have not enough self-respect to do that, we cannot have you here. Leave us, Delia.”

“ I will speak first, I must speak first ! Billy goes away from England to-morrow. He wishes to see you all, and if you do not go to him now you may never see him again.”

Joan rose, put down her cup, opened the door, and stood beside it.

"Delia," she said in a low voice, "I insist on your leaving this room; and you are not to enter it again until you have permission."

Delia withdrew. She went up to her bedroom, but soon the confinement of four walls became intolerable. The feeling was upon her that life was pressing her to death. She must have more space in which to breathe, in which to think. Bareheaded as she was, she went downstairs and out of doors into the freshness and peace of the evening. She crossed the lawn, already ghostlike in its mantle of dew, into the green meadows cooling slowly from the heat of the day. Cattle lowed from the fields, hedge-cricket made their little noises, birds uttered their evening notes; there was the sound of a thousand insect voices, yet over and above all these was the peace of a hundred thousand years.

To Delia in her unquietness the great peace of God was like a balm; but not even the majesty of a sunset falling on green fields could assuage the wild sorrow by which she was overborne. She was mute with grief; but she had an almost unconquerable desire to bury her face in the swathes of lush grass ice-cold with dew.

What had her brother done and the girl he loved, that he should be treated as an outcast? What taint lurked in love itself that those who were held in its thrall should be punished thus? Was it a crime, the violation of some secret law, for one human creature to love another?

There was the example of her own case. She, in the desire of her spirit, had dared to love, but how bitterly had the act been visited upon her! She was condemned to a perpetual hungering torment that nought could appease, a torturing deprecation of self that nothing could heal. And even could she, like her brother, have brought her love to its consummation, she saw the price at which it would have been obtained. The scorn of those she held dear would have fallen with equal heaviness upon her.

She remembered the strength and the courage of this beloved brother. Why was she incapable of such fortitude

as his? Ah! but then his was the requital of love. Well might his heart be upheld in high endurance.

Her wandering feet strayed far across the fields in the direction in which the cottage lay. As soon as she realized its nearness she turned and went back. Intensely she longed to see that beloved brother again. But she did not dare. It would shatter her to look upon him now. They were a pair of outcasts. The hands of those they held dear were now uplifted against them. They were pariah in the name of love.

Thus she turned from the cottage, and in utter self-abandonment bent her steps the other way. Chance took her towards that tower, from whose crazy heights she had been delivered by the arms of one when the jaws of death were open below to receive her.

Many times since that April afternoon had she put the question to herself: Why, if she had no existence for him, why if she was no more to him than a stone, or a tree, or a blade of grass—why had he risked his life for hers? Surely he, whose life was developed so highly, would have had too keen a sense of its value to imperil it for a whim. And yet how much more merciful it would have been to let her perish.

Perhaps it was not chance after all that was leading her to that wild scene. Or chance may be only a name for a number of subtle agencies all working in secret to a predestined end. She was going to the ruin in an instinctive, involuntary manner; and yet who shall say she was not aware of what she did? The dizzy heights that rose there gauntly in the dusk were the only objects to which life now attached a meaning. They filled her eyes, and through the mists of the evening called her to receive the consolation they alone could bestow. And in the weary spirit there was a yearning, vague, irrational, almost too impalpable to be expressed. It was a desire to lay her throbbing temples on cold stone. There may have been a promise of the eternal quietness, of the ultimate peace for every living thing when at last it lays down the burden that has grown too heavy to bear, in those upright walls covered with ivy and years, on

which poor old Time himself was allowed to rest like one who is tired.

The sun had vanished ; the wonderful evening of the early summer was deepening rapidly to dusk. The dew was on the fields, a pale, faint curtain ; it hung before her as she walked enfolding hedge and pasture. The small chill moon and a few faint stars were in the sky ; the distant wind walked softly in the valley. Hardly an ember of light was left when she climbed up the familiar hill into the shadow of the ruin. The deep reflection that it cast made it almost invisible ; while too much was she wounded by intolerable memories to discern a vague mass, a dark something outlined in mirk against a wall of ivy.

In her obsession she approached within a few yards of it, and, bareheaded as she was, pressed her aching hair against the ruin. The first touch of the cold stone brought relief. The tears burst out of her heart. In the first ecstasy of feeling them flow once again she surrendered herself to a strange orgy of passion, and craved that she might weep to death. But soon the sense of oblivion was invaded by a voice. It was as though experience were repeating itself. It was as if some pregnant incident of an existence in some far-off aeon too remote for the senses to accept, were flowing back into memory. To Delia the voice was the faint voice of a phantom floating among the winds of the glebe.

“ Alas ! alas ! ” were the words it spoke.

By now there was a quality in it that seemed to arrest the beating of her heart. She looked round wildly, and was able to discern the dim yet luminous outlines of a face she had never looked to see again. She uttered a cry like a little hunted animal. The next instant she was encompassed strongly, with the tip of her nose, the line of her lips, and the point of her chin all huddled together against something breathing and responsive.

She was content to close her eyes and lie there captive. Her heart had resumed its motions, but now it pattered quick and little, like a bird's when, after being driven hard about a greenhouse, it is caught and held in the hand. But in the wild flutterings of her spirit there was no desire for

escape. She had no wish other than never to emerge from the arms that kept her. In the ecstasy of feeling them about her she closed her eyes and craved she might never open them again.

Minutes passed without speech.

“Alas! alas!” The words were repeated.

She still hung in his arms, heeding nothing.

“Alas, poor wild little bird!” he said, sensible of the motions of her heart as it beat through her print dress.

He pressed his lips upon the wet cold hair.

“Oh! why have you come like this, and in such a season? You are overborne, you poor wild thing beaten against stone by stress of weather. Or, no, your pulses flutter like those of a lamb that has been driven till it dies.”

She still clung to him with all her strength, fearing in some desperate way that when she released him he would go.

“You went away—you left me, and I—I felt I could not live.”

“But I come back to you now.”

“You will not go from me again.”

“Never, never!”

“I thought you had gone away and that you would never return. Oh! I could not bear it!”

“You have suffered,” he said, gravely pitiful.

Her lips were yielded to his.

“I have been weak,” he said. “You make me begin to see that I did not know you, even as I did not know myself. But I must tell my story, in the hope that it may help you to forgive me.”

Delia strained to him closer.

“Almost from the first day of our coming together I saw how careful I must be; and as the weeks went by I grew afraid. I did not know myself. You see I am speaking out all that is in my mind, for there can be no secret between us now.”

Delia tucked the point of her chin deeper into his coat.

“At first, you see, you had not this great meaning for me.

You were the first specimen of womanhood of a rare variety I had seen ; and I suppose I was Professor Dryasdust looking at your wonder and your mystery under a double magnifying-glass. At least, that was how it seemed at first. You were an enormously interesting specimen, but you did not fill my nights and days. But then, after a while, you grew into something else."

She lay half swooning on his coat.

"After that I began to know you for what you were. I began to carry away the sound of your voice in my ears. It grew like music ; such music that one day, as I was reading *Lycidas*, it pronounced the magic numbers word by word. And I remember that one calm midnight, writing in my attic, the page became a mirror in which I could see your face. There and then I threw down the pen, and for a whole week I knew not how to take it up again. But with all this I felt you were going faster and farther than could I. It had already come to me that you had the greater nature, or at least the greater one in love. You see, we wretched artist people have only about a fifth part of a soul to call our own, a poor gift, alas ! to bestow upon a very woman who has given us the whole of hers.

"That was why I grew afraid. I must be wary to protect you. Therefore when I went to London I was sorely tried. My heart had become the background of two great powers in the strange inner world. Nature, the mighty mother, had made her call upon me—yet I knew myself to be the bond slave of Art, the mighty mistress. And with her looming ever in the background, I knew not what to do. If ever you read the lives of such as me, you will understand what I mean, my little fairy princess. And so I deemed the honest course was to part from you without a hint of the terrible conflict you had aroused.

"But that all lies behind us now. Whatever I may have been to you at the time of my going away, within one short month you had become that to me, and more. You had entered into your kingdom. The scheme of things no longer had a meaning apart from you. Day and night I was in your thrall. You were in my dreams, you were in my work.

You came to me in a thousand shapes that made your absence mock me. The light in your eyes, the carriage of your proud little head, the sound of your feet, the tones of your voice—oh, I cannot tell you how they haunted me!

“And so at last I awoke to find myself worthy. I had passed through the ordeal of absence, and instead of becoming less to me you had become more, a thousand times more. Thus when I left London this morning to spend a few days with my father at Cuttisham, I resolved that I would seek you and make my confession. But I did not look to find you here. I cannot tell what mysterious agent brought you, because in the letter I sent to you this morning I did not mention time or place. Above all, I made no reference to this ruin; indeed, it was not until half an hour ago that I thought of coming here.”

“It is a mysterious Providence,” said Delia in a voice that thrilled him. “Let us kneel here on this bank of earth and ask God to help us.”

“Are we not strong enough to shape our own destiny?” said the young man in his power. He gripped her so tightly that she could have cried out in ecstasy of pain.

But the return of sanity was bringing its reaction. She began to shiver in the arms of her lover.

“Ah, you do not know, you do not know!” she said mournfully.

“Are we not of the mettle that grips the giant Difficulty by the throat?” he vaunted. “You would hardly believe how many times I have thrown him to the ground.”

“I have seen you do it once,” she said, with a wild exaltation stirring in her heart. “I have seen you do it when no other in the world would have dared.”

“It can be done again.”

“I am thinking of my father. You do not know my father.”

Her voice was like a wail.

“The name of that giant is Convention. Together, in our might, I think we can do battle with him too.”

She clung to his coat convulsively.

"You do not fear, my princess?"

"In my heart I am a wretched coward."

"And I beside you?"

"You cannot know what my father is. Men like you cannot understand."

"Will the ogre kill me and eat me for his supper?"

Delia shivered and nestled to his coat.

"We will put on our invisible coat and our shoes of swiftness, and borrow the sword Excalibur, or get friend Merlin to steal it for us. Be of good faith, my fairy princess. I will fight any giant in any enchanted castle, in any impenetrable fastness with fiery dragons before the mouth of it, or I were unworthy to hold you in my arms. Grip tighter, princess, and fear not."

"If I only had courage!" said Delia.

She was shivering still at the remembrance of her brother's fate.

"You shall not fear while you lie against my heart. I would there were light by which you could read my face."

By virtue of these high-hearted speeches her cheeks began suddenly to glow. She saw him as he swooned upon the bank of earth with the blood upon his hands. Words such as these were his heroic birthright. In another they had been idle vaunts, but in him, the happy warrior, they were proper to his quality.

"I am not afraid," she said, speaking very low.

"You were not mine, princess, were it otherwise."

"But must you—must you see my father?"

"Yes, indeed. I must beard that ogre with my good sword in my hand."

She trembled painfully.

"How cold you are! And how your poor heart beats! Come, princess, you shall not fear."

"Oh, but my father is terrible!"

"And we? Are we not terrible also?"

Again she closed her eyes and lay back shuddering and buried her head in his coat. Again, with extreme delicacy

he kissed the cold hair. Silence held them for a while. He then put off his tone of romantic lightness for one a little more matter-of-fact, as became one in whose veins the Saxon was mingled with the Celt.

“And now,” he said, “suppose we are material? I think we can safely say the world has not ear-marked us to come together, but accidents of birth and fortune have no lien upon our immortal souls. Now I shall be able to provide a sort of fairy palace for you, princess, if your aristocratic spirit can stoop to the region of shall we say—South Kensington? You see I am to get seven hundred pounds a year from the *Review*; I enjoy a small subsidy from my university; and publishers, grim ogres all, are deigning to take an interest in the little book I gave to the world a month ago. Therefore still continuing to degrade ourselves with the material, there should be the means to provide you with curds and whey and an occasional bunch of flowers newly from the country, which I have always read is all that fairy princesses require to support existence. And now the hour is late. I can feel your hands are ice; you have no hat and coat; your dress is very thin.”

At the mention of the hour Delia leapt up in terror.

“Oh! what is the time? I had quite forgotten. And I have not been home to dinner. I shall be scolded dreadfully.”

He struck a match and looked at his watch.

“Five minutes to eleven.”

“I must fly.”

“Alas! poor Cinderella!”

Long ago it had become quite dark. They picked their path through the bracken on the steep hillside, and under the shyest, faintest shred of moon made their way across the dew-soaked meadows to the house. A clock from a neighbouring village told the hour of eleven. Delia’s heart sank as she counted the strokes.

“Oh! what will happen?” she cried despairingly.

“Fear not, princess,” said the deep voice at her side. “Should we walk now into the ogre’s parlour hand in hand?”

“ Oh, no, no, no ! To-night I am sure I could not bear what would follow. I think you will never be able to understand my father, and my mother also, and my sisters worst of all ! ”

“ I think you are right,” he said ; and his calmness seemed to add intensity to her despair. “ We must be wise and choose the hour.”

“ Ah, you do not know,” she moaned.

“ Fear nothing, princess.”

“ You are so much stronger, so much braver than I,” said Delia, peering into his face with the aid of the uncertain light of the moon. And her own eyes glowed until they were like the stars that looked down upon her. “ Even in love you are so much greater than I, and yet my love drove me to the verge of despair.”

“ You will never doubt again, princess ? ”

“ Never, never while I live ! ”

“ I have not doubted nor ever will. A kiss and then good night—here by this noble tree on this fair spot of earth. To-morrow or the next day I will beard the ogre in his lair ; but come what may—come shine, come hail, we pledge ourselves for ever ! ”

“ For ever ! ”

She was locked a wild instant in a last embrace.

They parted under the young moon and went their ways. Delia was bareheaded and thinly clad. The damp of the night had penetrated her stockings and shoes ; her skirts were a sop where their edges had swept the dew from the fields through which they had trailed. The clock in the church in the village told the half-hour after eleven. She had had no food since the middle of the day, and that very little ; many hours she had been exposed to the chill of the night, but she was neither cold, nor hungry, nor afflicted with weariness. Nor was she heavy of heart. There was an exaltation in her veins that for the moment placed her beyond all calamities of the flesh.

When at last the form of her lover had been engulfed by the shadows of an immense wall of trees, Delia turned to go indoors. She might have had fear in her soul and in her

limbs weariness. Hunger and other distresses might have lurked within the slight frame. But she was sensible of none of these things. There was a magical secret in her heart, so that she seemed no longer to have feet of clay rooted in the mire of the world.

CHAPTER XXIX

TWO WOMEN

TO Delia's relief she discovered the great door of the entrance hall to be ajar. So late was the hour for such an early-retiring household that she had been afraid she would have to arouse it if she was to gain admittance that night.

The fact that the hall door was undone was remarkable and of a piece with the events of that evening. But looking a little farther she found the explanation of it. As soon as she entered, the old butler, in a pair of carpet slippers and with a candle in his hand, emerged very softly from the dark interior. He placed a finger to his lips.

"Be very quiet, miss. They all thought you were in your bedroom at dinner. They thought you were unwell. They have not found you out, and they won't if you go up very quietly."

"You are very good to me, dear Porson. How did you know I was out?"

"I had a sort of instinct, miss. You were not at the dinner-table. And I learned from Walters that you were not in your room. You will find a fire there, and a plate of cold meat and a basin of warm milk. If I may take the liberty of saying so, miss, I have noticed you have not been quite yourself for some time."

"You are too good to me, dear Porson."

"Now, miss, if you go very quiet past your mother's door, no one will know of this. Even Mrs. Smith doesn't know."

The old fellow lighted Delia to her bedroom, bearing the candle cautiously and solemnly before her.

It was true that at the dinner-table her absence had excited no comment, after Joan had hazarded the remark that she might be unwell. Her mother, who was late for the meal herself, as, unknown to anybody, she had been to the cottage to say good-bye to Billy, was hardly in her usual vigilant frame of mind. Besides, she also, by the light of what had happened at her interview with Delia that morning, thought she might be indisposed. And Broke himself, who of late had become the most apathetic of men, hardly spoke a word throughout the meal, betraying an interest in nothing beyond the strip of tablecloth immediately before him.

Delia, therefore, was spared the ordeal which she dreaded. She drank the basin of warm milk gratefully, and slipped into bed, and then, for the first time for many an unhappy night, she slept the sleep of youth, of health, of weariness. It was deep, dreamless, reconstructing.

She awoke with a clear heart to the twitterings of birds about her window, as in the unintrospective days of old. Refreshed in mind and body she sprang from her bed. There was a little carol upon her lips ; the night of darkness and despair was past. She had awakened to a fresh and joyous day. Her spirit was no longer racked by doubt. She was beloved.

In the sanity of morning, fear could exist no more. An exquisite self-reliance thrilled within her. No room was there for lesser doubts now that the crowning one of all had been forever laid at rest. The little world in which she had been bred, which a few brief months ago had been so dear to her, might now conspire to shoot its venom at her and at the man she loved, but nothing, as it seemed in the sovereign light of this splendid day, could poison the clear fountain whence sprang the faith that made them strong.

She dressed blithely. Singing, she sallied out to feed her pets. Presently she returned for a crust of bread to gnaw herself, for she had suddenly made the discovery that she was desperately hungry.

It was hardly more than five o'clock. The cold and pure morning airs that swept her temples now recalled vaguely to her mind the feverish longing that had possessed her the

previous evening to lay her burning forehead on cold stone. But the transactions of that delirium had become little more than a dream already. She was far too sane now to be able to look back upon them with any sense of detail.

She sang to herself softly as she tripped over the wet lawns. Fate should contrive its worst, but the necessary resolution was now hers to stand steadfast. She was like her brother now. Yesterday her complaint had been that her love had no requital. But now, like his, it had achieved its consummation. Yesterday she felt she could never be as he was; she had awakened now to learn that she had misjudged the forces of her heart. This morning her strength seemed as great as that of any creature in the world.

Her happy way led her down a remote path, in which was a small summer-house without a door. Coming upon it suddenly she was transfixed by a figure seated in it shrouded in grey light. It was Maud Wayling. She was reading a book. She lifted her wonderful grey eyes to Delia, and smiled wanly.

"Come and sit by me," she said, "and take my hand and talk to me. Are we not both wayfarers in the same dark valley?"

Delia was no longer timid. Ever since Maud Wayling had come among them she, in common with her sisters, had been in awe of her. But this morning that feeling and the self-conscious reserve induced by it were no longer hers. Without hesitation she came to her. She was afflicted by the pallor of the elder girl's face. It was strangely cold and placid, as transparent as marble; the dark lines that had lately come about her eyes alone had value as colour. As Delia came to her now she was able to read that proud bosom by the light of her own experience.

"You loved him—how you must have loved!" Delia's voice was strangely hushed, but there was a thrill in it, almost of tears.

"Yes, I loved him. And you—?" The elder girl gently clasped Delia's hand with her cold fingers.

"Yes, yes—but it has pleased God to be very kind to me. I am very happy now. But perhaps I ought not to tell

you this—perhaps it is cruel. Perhaps I ought not to speak of my happiness when you are so unhappy. Please forgive me.”

“I am so glad to see you happy.” The elder girl kissed Delia gravely. “I did not dare to speak to you, but I have prayed for you.”

“Oh,” said Delia, with a pang, “how blind I have been! But now I think I see. We have been walking hand in hand. I have not been alone in the darkness. Oh, why has your happiness been taken from you while mine has been given back to me again! It doesn’t seem just.”

“I am trying to form the habit of not complaining,” said the unhappy girl. “My life has been too self-absorbed.”

Delia, in spite of her new happiness, was filled with pain. In regarding such a distress she beheld a state of mind from which she had escaped miraculously. This aloof proud woman was being seared by a suffering she understood too well.

CHAPTER XXX

IN THE MAËLSTROM

WHEN Delia came in to breakfast her mother looked at her searchingly. She did not speak, but the glance seemed full of meaning. The thought swept over Delia suddenly that her lover had posted a letter to her the previous day, and that as yet it had not come into her hands. A pang seized her. It was born of the conviction that the letter had been intercepted.

From that moment reaction came upon her. The buoyant fearlessness of the early morning began slowly to decline. Reflection, moreover, brought foreboding in its train. What would happen when her lover came to see her father? She hardly dared to frame the sinister question. Her mother, in the first days of his coming to that house, had shown herself to be capable of making cruel references to him. As for her father—him to whom her every instinct had led her to look as a natural friend and protector—after his treatment of the brother beloved by them all, who should say in what way he would be moved to deal with her!

The consequences that might ensue upon her lover's coming to that house grew intolerable to consider. The subject induced a state of terrible restlessness and suspense. She must do something, go somewhere. Accordingly she went to the cottage to see her brother's young wife. Had she not promised Billy to go and see her often? By so doing there was a sense of fulfilling a duty that had been imposed upon her; also there was a longing within her to acquire the first-hand experiences of those in the vortex of this passion of love.

At the cottage, although the sunshine still bathed the

clean walls, and in the wood behind the birds still piped their spring notes, the spirit that yesterday presided was no longer there. All things were as they were, yet the genius of the place was changed. To-day all things were flat and tame and palled upon the heart, where yesterday they were quick with life and full of a memorable fragrance. At the moment Delia entered the spotless kitchen she was afflicted with this sense of loss. She was haunted by the absence of a laughing presence, a pair of impudent, tormenting arms. And her feeling of bereavement was reflected poignantly in the faces of the young woman and the old.

Alice came to greet her with a hungry eagerness, with a childish cry of welcome. She had already learned to overcome her timidity in regard to Delia. She was Billy's sister; and her love for him was a complement to, not a rival of, her own. But this morning the young wife was in despair.

"I have ruined him," she said in a slow, hard voice.

Delia took her in her arms tenderly.

"No, oh, no!" she found the courage to say. "How could you possibly do that?"

"It is because of me he is driven away," said the young wife. "I was wicked and thought only of myself, or I should have known that it must be so. It was not possible for me to be the fit companion of my husband. I ought to have known that, and saved him from the ruin he could not foresee."

"It is not ruin," said Delia. "He will soon come back to you. His love for you will be greater, if it were possible for his love to be greater, and he will no longer be dependent on others."

"There is something here in my heart that tells me he will not return. I have been base and wicked, and God will know how to punish me. I have thought only of myself. I did not think of those who were near and dear to him; of you and your sisters, of the beautiful lady who loved him, of the mother who has been so kind to me, and the poor father I have made so unhappy. I do not know how any of you can forgive me, I know that God will not."

The hard tones of her despair were as so many blows upon Delia's heart. The words of consolation welling out of it were forced back ruthlessly.

"When your brother gave me his love," said the young wife, "my thoughts were of him and of myself and of all that we were to one another. And when he asked me to be his wife I could only see the bearing it would have on my own life, and on my aunt's. I saw no farther then. I could not see you all in the background, all as full of unhappiness as I was full of joy. Poverty and hard work have made me cruel and self-seeking. I have ruined him who loved me because I would not deny myself his love. But God will punish me."

The fragile creature was painfully overwrought.

"He will come back soon," said Delia valiantly. "He will come back very rich, and my father and my mother and my sisters will be so happy that they will be very grateful to you."

"He will never come back," said the young wife. "I have been so wicked that God will never allow him to return. I shall not be allowed another moment of happiness. I have had my hour and it was more than I deserved!"

"You have not been wicked," said Delia. "Only heartless and unworthy people could say that. Love is not wickedness. If we are punished when we love worthily those who punish us are unjust."

A prophetic fire broke forth so suddenly from the lips of Billy's young sister, that Alice recoiled from her and looked wonderingly into the vivid eyes. The brooding depths she beheld were the haunts of mysteries that her own brief but highly wrought experience dimly enabled her to apprehend.

"Those were my thoughts but a few weeks ago," said Alice, "but I was blind then and I could not see. Believe me, dear Miss Broke, such a blindness is wrong. If we buy our love at the price of the happiness of others surely our selfishness cannot be forgiven. My love for Billy and my poverty caused me to be blind and callous. I could not see the truth, and I did not wish. I was beloved and I asked no more. But the scales are taken from my eyes by the

God who knew all the time what I was doing. Yes, Miss Broke, He knew what I was doing. And now He has taken away the happiness I have gained so wrongfully, and because of that it will never be given back. God knows I am unworthy."

The hard poignancy that underlay the soft voice seemed to bruise Delia. Her mother, in the first interview with the old aunt, had had a similar experience.

No words of consolation, however tenderly and valiantly conveyed, could avail against the conviction of Alice that an offended Deity was dealing in person with her affairs. And worse, such were the clear eyes that anguish had given her, she could trace in Delia's eager attempts to bring her comfort something of the source from which they sprang. Such passionate speeches of consolation could hardly arise from a purely impersonal desire to make less her pain. Too palpably the words leaped forth under the goad of a fierce impulse. Alice, by the light of her experience, was able to read the cause of the flaming cheeks, the throbbing tones. Her wise eyes saw that Delia was scorched already by the sacred flame.

"Forgive me, dear Miss Broke, but I beseech you to heed what has fallen upon me."

Delia turned cold and faint. A feeling of terror was overspreading her.

"But, oh, Alice, how can we injure others if our love is worthy?"

The young wife clasped her hands and closed her eyes like one who suffers an unendurable agony.

"Ah, dear Miss Broke, those were my words only a month ago!"

"I will repeat them," said Delia wildly, seizing the hands of Alice.

"The thought is too hard for us to bear," said Alice. "We dare not think that a love like ours should injure others."

"Oh, I will not believe it!"

"Have I not ruined your brother?"

"No," said Delia fiercely.

“Has not your father always been kind and generous? If there was not clear cause of offence in me, surely so just a man would not have turned against him. It is because he knows I am unworthy; and indeed I am, else never in my dreadful selfishness would I have taken away from him I love more than it was possible for the love I bore him to repay.”

Against such a desolation nothing could avail. All prophecy that Delia made of her brother's speedy and prosperous return fell upon deaf ears. Nothing could change that arid despair. Delia could not bear to stay and witness this grief that lay too deep for tears. Promising to return the next day and the next, and for many a one to come, as though in such a childlike willingness to heal some measure of relief might lurk, Delia left the cottage faint of spirit and cold of heart.

New doubts rose up in that impressionable mind. In the presence of a grief so barren, love itself lost something of its radiance. Was it after all a wicked act to fall in love? Her own case had a terrible parallel in that of the distraught young wife. There were those who were near and dear to her it behoved her to consider. There were the father and the mother and the sisters who would be stricken by her conduct. Was not Alice right? There was the duty she owed to others. She must yield her lover. Oh, God, she must yield him to the prejudices of those who held her dear!

The thought was too bitter to contemplate. She walked faster down the hill to the green fields, faster and faster she walked to the birds and the flowers and the sweet-breathing earth. She must outpace that thought, run from it, lose it wholly and for ever. It must never find her again. Kind God in heaven, it must never find her again!

It is given to none, however, to bar out thought by the door of resolution. The cruel suggestion continued to recur. No matter whether she walked or ran the spectre was ever by her side. If such an anguish as that of the young wife at the cottage was the fruit of a pure passion, must there not be some subtle taint unrevealed to those who nourished

it? else she who had slaked her thirst at the Pierian spring could never awake to discover that the draught had poisoned her sweet blood.

Could it be that her duty to her kindred was more sacred than that she owed to her lover and to her own nature? The self-accusing misery of her brother's wife haunted Delia like a premonition of fate. She and the man she loved must inevitably stand thus before the world. Must the same outraged Deity intervene to blast their lives if their unsanctioned love dared to set the world at nought?

That afternoon was to be dedicated to a garden-party at a house in the neighbourhood. The six daughters of the house of Broke put on their white summer frocks, which for several years past had done duty on state occasions, and set out in the ramshackle omnibus with their mother. Even as she went forth with her sisters dark forebodings clouded the heart of Delia. There was a presumption in it which amounted to certainty that the man she loved would call upon her father during her absence from home. High tension is apt to breed a strain of fatalism even in well-balanced natures; Delia felt sure her lover would come to her father's house when there would be no friendly presence to protect him. Within the last few days she had conceived almost a horror of her father. In the revolt from a lifetime of blind adoration he stood forth now in her imagination as a very ogre. She longed with all her soul to be with her knight when he came to confront the giant in his lair. The sense that she was by might do something to soften his ordeal, although his courage was the noblest thing she had ever known, In her chivalrous heart she yearned to buckle on the armour or to bear the spear of the champion who was to contend for their joint cause before the dragon. If only he had not to go forth alone; if only she could be there to help him; if only it could be her fortune to intercept any buffet hurled at the sacred form of him who dared everything for her!

By the time the afternoon came round she had a conviction that a grave need for her presence in that house would arise. So luridly was the image of impending calamity

before her eyes that she pleaded a headache in order to avoid the garden-party. Her mother, however, was emphatic in her insistence that she should go with the others. And to Delia the uncompromising nature of that decree, added to the fact that her mother had already suppressed her lover's letter, and had studiously avoided any mention of him, gave colour to her fears.

CHAPTER XXXI

IN WHICH OUR HERO TAKES DOWN HIS BATTLE-AXE

THERE are times when a man may feel himself to be the victim of a conspiracy on the part of fate. Misfortune succeeds misfortune, until the most trivial incidents assume a tragic guise, and the commonest incidents of life become part of the design against him.

Broke sat in his library that afternoon re-reading for the tenth time a letter that lately had come into his hands. It was not addressed to him in the first place, but that was not a fact to lessen its significance in his eyes. It must be confessed that to a man of sober mind there was hardly a line in it which could be construed into offence. But Broke's mind no longer moved upon the path of absolute sanity. It ran ahead of itself and climbed perilous altitudes to view the motives of others. Other people, in their most ordinary dealings with him, wore a sinister aspect. Suspicion-clouded everything; he was no longer tolerant; in peace he could neither live nor let live. There was a conspiracy against him; within every cloak that fluttered there was an anarchist ready to cast a bomb.

The world had laid a plot to pull down to its own ignoble level the sovereign thing he called his pride. North, south, east and west it was springing its base emissaries on him. Now they tripped him up, now threw dust into his eyes, now stabbed him in the back, now hit him in the face. The foul wretches were driving him mad. They would have to be taught that he could strike as well as they. But it would not be done from behind in his case.

He was beginning to feel that he could bear his indigni-

ties no more. First was he smitten with a bitter poverty, a fell disease that was loathed by every right-thinking man. Then upon the pretext of curing that distemper a wretched crew who in the times of his prosperity would never have been allowed to cross his threshold, offered him gibes and insults in the guise of balsams for his malady. Then his son, his most cherished possession, for whom he had made great sacrifices, was lured into the plot against him. The fellow had been entrapped without knowing that such a thing as a plot existed. Then again, his wife, who had had all his trust, seemed to be in danger of falling a prey to these diabolical agencies. Had not she, foolish deluded woman, already insulted his intelligence by seeking to defend that for which no defence was possible?

And now finally, as if these things were not enough to undermine the sane spirit of a man and cause its overthrow, these blackguard conspirators had arranged to strike a blow at him through the medium of one of his daughters. A man and a father may hold up his head in the midst of much. He may, for example, support with the expenditure of a few groans the black ingratitude of an only son. But a daughter is too tender, too sacred. The disloyalty of such a one, as in the case of Lear, goes straight to his heart and strikes him down.

The letter in his hand had been placed there by his wife. It was addressed to his youngest daughter, presumably with the child's connivance. It bore the signature of a Cuttisham tradesman. Such incidents were of almost daily occurrence now. They were part of the scheme. The indignities that had recently been put upon him were incredible; he began to marvel at his own patience. But they were telling upon him. Every time he was baited his fibres stiffened, he grew more implacable.

Still, there is the trite proverb that those whom the gods would destroy they first deprive of reason. Broke had begun to feel that reason was being plucked out of him by a ruthless hand. They were not content with his son, they must take his daughter. The patronage of Salmon was not enough; he must suffer the equality of Breffit. Really

the whole business was becoming too extravagant. It would have been farce, of a somewhat dubious quality certainly, if the pinch of his circumstances had not banished mirth from his lips. He felt that laughter was demanded; in his former state he must have laughed heartily; but a ruined man loses the knack.

It was while he was surrendered to these reflections, that the butler entered to say that a Mr. Porter desired to see him.

"I will see him," said Broke briefly.

The visitor entered the room not without a certain self-possession, a part of his natural simplicity or part of his general insensibility, whichever construction the beholder preferred to place upon it. Broke was inclined to regard it as part of his effrontery. He neither offered the young man the privilege of shaking his hand nor did he invite him to sit down.

Broke waited with a grim and rather grey face, somewhat the colour of ashes, for the visitor to state his errand. He waited with a certain curiosity as to what mode of procedure he would adopt. To aid him by speaking a word would be to rob the thing of some of its scientific interest. Therefore he stood looking at him steadily with a slightly unnatural calmness. A man entirely devoid of emotion does not usually stand with his fists clenched, while the veins swell on his forehead. And all the time the audience sitting in heaven, those earnest followers of time-honoured and legitimate farce, had their necks craned upon this born comedian, not missing a syllable that fell from his mouth or a single facial gesture. Indeed, they doted on the situation itself, and on the charming developments it might be expected to produce. Even the God of Irony himself, that blasé old dramatist, might have been seen to throw himself back contentedly in the author's box, with a look of satisfaction upon his face. If his leading man, who was working so famously, proved equal to the scene which had been specially designed for him, the thing was bound to be the talk of Olympus. There are worse things than being an author when the stalls are hushed to silence by a little

thing of your own, which is being played so beautifully by your friend the manager and his gifted company.

"I don't suppose, Mr. Broke," his visitor began, "you know why I am here. Perhaps you will kindly allow me——"

Broke cut him short. Now that the fellow was speaking the sound of his voice was not to be borne.

"Are you the writer of that letter?"

The letter he held in his hand he gave to his visitor.

"Yes, I wrote it," said Porter, who was rather taken aback.

"Perhaps—ah—you will have the goodness to—ah—explain what you mean by it."

"I am here for that purpose. The facts are these——"

"Stop!" said Broke. "I will not trouble you. If you—ah—want to explain your effrontery I may say at once that—ah—nothing you may say will—ah—explain it in the least."

"Effrontery!" The young man grew rather pale. "I must ask you to forgive me, Mr. Broke, if I do not view my conduct in that light. I have the sanction of your daughter——"

"The case calls for no statement. An apology may not be out of place, although it is my—ah—duty to warn you beforehand that it is not likely to be accepted."

Porter looked bewildered. Delia's father seemed a very impossible kind of man.

"An ample and unreserved apology can be—ah—the only pretext for bringing you here to-day. I—ah—decline to hear any defence of your conduct."

"I should be sorry, sir, to think that my conduct has been of a kind to call for a defence."

"I—ah—decline to discuss it in any form. It is indefensible."

Broke spoke with admirable point and cogency. But the powerful effort he was making to keep a hold upon himself was only partially successful. His face grew tawnier and his voice shook.

The younger man also was losing a little of his serenity. By an earnest self-mastery he had acquired the habit of

tolerance. But his nature was otherwise. Men of his type are apt to be morbidly sensitive. He was beginning to feel already that Mr. Broke must not trespass too far. There were limits. Beyond them a sense of dignity entered into the question. Delia's father was becoming intolerably offensive.

"I hope, sir," said Porter, forcing himself to be calm, "you will let me speak. I may say this matter involves your daughter's happiness."

"Stop!" Broke commanded him. "You have no right, no authority to mention my daughter. It is—ah—gross impertinence. I—ah—shall feel obliged if you will please understand that our interview is at an end."

Porter gave back a step; there was not a trace of colour in his face.

"Mr. Broke," he said, "even allowing for the fact that the relations we have stood in hitherto have been those of master and servant, it hardly seems to me that this is a tone one man is privileged to use to another."

"Do you propose to teach me manners?"

The younger man did not yield an inch to the grim sneer.

"No; I ask only for common courtesy."

"I advise you to go," said Broke hoarsely.

His visitor remained immovable and erect with a rather fine-drawn smile on his white face. His lips were shut tight; the honest eyes were wide and fearless.

Broke's blood was up; and when it was in that condition he was not prone to overmuch consideration for others. Besides, in *Etiquette for the Elect*, the invaluable little manual of behaviour by which he ordered his life, it was laid down as a first principle that the persons who were entitled to his consideration were surprisingly few. A Cuttisham tradesman, for example, was not of the number.

They continued to face each other unflinchingly. Broke had indicated the necessity for Porter's withdrawal. In silence he waited for him to comply. But his visitor did not move a step.

"I am here to speak," he said, "and speak, sir, I must.

It is of the first importance. The opportunity cannot recur."

Broke raised his chin warningly. Porter still betrayed no disposition to quit his ground. And to the obstinate nothing is more intolerable than the exhibition of that quality in another. Broke was confronted by the sudden limit to his patience. It yawned a very precipice under his feet. The devil in that medieval heart was beginning to wriggle ferociously in its struggles to get free.

"I speak with the sanction of your daughter," said the young man.

"You lie," said Broke. "How dare you—ah—affront me to my face? If you do not get out now—at once, I shall—ah—ah—be under the—ah—ah—necessity of pitching you out. You cad!"

Porter heard dully. His senses were numbed and faint, but in his head the blood was cool. Not a line relaxed in his bearing. There had been aroused in him the desperate tenacity, the concentrated determination that was the keystone of his nature. He did not move an inch, but livid as he was, he met the unbridled eyes of Broke with a contemplative gaze, which slowly acquired a tinge of pity.

When the medieval despot encounters a frank challenge to the unlicensed will which is his sovereign law, there is only one means left to him by which to vindicate it. Our hero took down his battle-axe.

"My God!" he cried, "you defy me in my own house, you—you counter-jumper. You've had a fair warning. You won't take it? Suppose you take this!"

"This" consisted of a heavy blow with the clenched fist full on the mouth of his visitor. He followed up with a tremendous clinch. In an instant he had got one hand as tight as a vice on the lean throat, and while the younger man, half stunned and shattered to pieces by the blow, made semi-conscious and ineffectual wriggles like a dying rat, Broke hustled and dragged him to the door of the room. Without much trouble he got him over the threshold into the hall, but, on arrival there, his task became more difficult.

They could not have been more unequally matched.

Broke was a full-blooded son of the soil, lusty of thew, close knit, with a great arching chest ; in form a splendid animal, and rejoicing like one in a life of activity in the open air.

Porter, on the other hand, was of the type that is bred in towns. He seemed to present an appearance of arrested development, of general physical incompetence. He was small-boned, short-limbed, muscleless and puny ; his whole frame was undersized and rather anæmic. But as soon as he found himself hustled into the hall, and he was able to gain, by the aid of the little sense that had not been knocked out of him already, a clearer idea of what had befallen him, and what was like to befall him further, his ineffectual ratlike wriggings, hitherto merely instinctive, became endowed with purpose. His puny hands rose in the air, and the fingers of them clawed about at large like the tentacles of an octopus, until they found a grip on Broke. His thin legs writhed and coiled themselves around the solid oak-like calves of his adversary. He entered into a struggle to free his neck from the grasp of iron that was choking out his life, and in the effort his collar and the band of his shirt came away together, and allowed him something of freedom.

It was a rather ludicrous scene that was enacted in the front hall in the view of Lord Bosket, who had that moment entered it, and also in that of divers astonished persons of the establishment. Not a word passed between the combatants. Their silence was ominous. The only sound that came from their strife was the continuous scuffling of their feet as they slid upon the highly polished floor, while now and then a grunt was wrung out of their tense machinery.

The younger and weaker man had not a chance, and the highest evidence to be adduced of his resolution was that he was able to prolong the uncompromising course of his exit. He was prepared to yield his life rather than submit to be run out at that distant door, but the blood in his veins was as water, and his flaccid muscles seemed to crumble like bread. Superhuman as were his struggles, they were of no more avail against the contained fury that encompassed him than is the falling earth against the energy of Cyclops.

Their clenched forms swayed this way and that, but their progress was ever in one direction.

The process was sinister in its quietude, its complete freedom from audible sound. In the anguish of contest their eyeballs might be breaking from their sockets, but the fact was not declared in the deadly silence with which they were knit to one another. The nearer Broke got his man to the door, the more powerful grew his victim's efforts to free his fists from the embrace that rendered them impotent. If his very life snapped in the act he felt he must get one blow home, that in some kind it might vindicate his manhood. He had the fury of the savage beast. The trained intellect was nothing to him now. Reason, veneered over with the civilized arts, forgot to exercise its functions. He was at the mercy of the primeval instinct which returns blow for blow. The shy and delicate spirit moving upon its high plane of thought and action was now akin to that of a wounded tiger.

The fury of the wild beast, however, could not avail. There was no escape from the grip that was crushing him, body and soul. He was almost demented, and snapping like a dog with his bloody teeth by the time he approached the threshold of the hall door; but no matter what he did he could not avert the crowning ignominy that awaited him. He would be spurned out of doors with a kick like a bag of shavings. The blow in the face that had knocked down the citadel of his intelligence, that slow work of years, as easily as a house of cards, must be submitted to. He saw red, but the deviser of his clay had withheld from him the strength, the common physical strength to requite his foe for the indignity that had been put upon him. As he swayed that moment close-knit to his adversary towards the farther door, life itself had been but a little price at which to buy the satisfaction of feeling his knuckles beating out the teeth of this murderous monster who had beaten out his.

At the last a snarl of rage was wrung out of him, to find he was powerless. It was the snarl of a ferocious cur as, with tongue protruding, it rolls over to die. He was mad

and drunk and blind by now. The vibrations of his heart were choking him. His rage was distilled through his throat in little sobs, but nothing now could save him. The stronger man had both hands upon his neck. Hê shook him like a rat. Afterwards he cast him forth. In contained fury he spurned him out of doors bleeding to the earth.

Broke immediately turned his back upon the figure sprawling on the gravel outside his door. His empurpled face was confronted by those of the excited servants and Lord Bosket; and as with chest hugely heaving and jowl inflamed he took his handkerchief from his pocket and slowly mopped away the signs of his discomposure, the voice of his brother-in-law, alarmed and querulous, broke upon his ears.

“My God! Edmund; you’ve about done for the feller.”

Broke having mopped a face and neck on which the veins were still swollen a good deal, his habitual heavy-footed serenity seemed to be restored to him. At least he greeted his brother-in-law with excellent composure.

“Hullo, Charles. Porson, you had—ah—better help the fellow about his business.”

Lord Bosket, however, was inclined to see a more sinister side to the affair.

“He don’t move,” he said. “We had better go and give him a leg up. I don’t know who he is or what he’s done, but he took his gruel well. He’s only a featherweight, but he was game right up to the finish. I like to see that; give me the chap or the horse that don’t know when he’s beat. It struck me, Edmund, that you were a bit severe, considerin’ he is not more than eight stone. He is not in your class, you know, at all. You are fifteen, if you are a pound. What’s he been doin’? Poachin’? Poisonin’ foxes?”

While Lord Bosket was making these remarks and putting forward these inquiries, the butler, a footman, the man who had accompanied the dogcart that had brought my lord thither, a gardener or two, and several odd men from the stables, formed a group round the man lying motionless with his blood staining the gravel. White-cheeked house-

maids peered out of the upper windows. Broke, however, heedless as to the fate of his victim, had betaken himself back to the library.

Lord Bosket now came bustling through the group, and seeing that the form they surrounded was insensible and that blood was issuing from it, he knelt down on the gravel with an air of professional assurance bred of experience in many glove fights. He tried to raise the unconscious man in his arms. Not being able to do so, he looked up at the on-lookers in a querulously agitated manner.

“We want a doctor,” he said. “Somebody go and get a doctor, can’t you? I don’t like it at all.”

CHAPTER XXXII

ENCOUNTER BETWEEN A DOGCART AND AN OMNIBUS

THEY picked up the young man and propped his head against a corner of the stone balustrade that ran at right angles to the front door. The appearance he made was so unfortunate that Lord Bosket became more agitated than ever.

“Get a doctor, can't you, somebody? Of course there's not one about. They are the same as the police—never there when you want 'em.”

There was no need to loose the young man's collar, because in the struggle it had been torn free. Water was sent for; but before that primitive remedy had arrived, to the immense relief of Delia's uncle and also that of the bystanders, consciousness showed signs of returning. Presently Porter opened his eyes. In addition to the distressing condition of his mouth, blood was flowing from a deep wound in the forehead upon which he had pitched in his exit. He certainly made a sorry figure with the blood dripping rapidly into his eyes, and smearing the vivid pallor of his cheeks.

As soon as Porter knew what the something was which was so warm and wet and so blinding, his feeling of repugnance was so great that he nearly became insensible again. It was only when he awoke to the fact that he was the centre of a group, and that anxious and startled faces were directed upon him, that he showed signs of regaining self-control. In the shock of this second discovery he stumbled to his feet. In the act, however, he nearly fell, and would have done so had not Lord Bosket supported him.

"It is no use, my lad," said Delia's uncle, taking hold of him firmly. "You'll have to have that head and mouth seen to, and thank God it's no worse. Get him a chair, somebody, can't you? And get him a drop o' brandy. Sit down there, my lad, and don't try standin' till we've fixed you up a bit. As damned nasty a cut as ever I saw. Sit down, and I'll tie this handkerchief round it temporarily, and then I'll drive you into Cuttisham, and let a vet. put a few stitches in it for you. Of course there isn't one in this God-forsaken hole!"

The sufferer, however, showed no inclination to accept services of any one. He made several weak efforts to escape from the group, and several times assured it feebly that "he was all right."

"Yes, my lad, you look all right, you do. But this will put the fear of God into you, what?"

The awe-inspiring agent in question proved to be brandy, which had now arrived, and Lord Bosket measured it out with paternal care, and, with a firmness that was quite unusual to his character, insisted on the young man drinking it. He then drank the remainder himself, with a relish far greater than the patient had exhibited, announcing to the onlookers as he did so that "these things were devilish upsettin'."

Nature was having her turn with Porter now. Fortunately, the tone of Delia's uncle was so solicitous, and his concern so evident, that in the end the shaken and demoralized young man surrendered to him entirely. In any case it was not in his power to make an effectual protest.

Delia's uncle having bandaged personally the deep cut near the temple with several large handkerchiefs and the moderate skill at his command, called to his man to bring the dogcart along. While this order was being obeyed Lord Bosket took out his pocket-book and selected therefrom two crisp pieces of paper.

"Here's a tenner, my lad. That'll help to put your head all right, eh?"

As the young man was in no condition to accept this specific for a broken mouth and a lacerated forehead, Delia's

uncle crushed them into one of the pockets of his coat. The cart having now been drawn up in a convenient manner, he said :

“ Hold him up while I get in. Then give him a hand, and mind how you do it. The poor devil's not quite himself. Anybody know who he is? I shall look well drivin' a poachin' feller into Cuttisham, but I expect that's about the truth. Never mind, Edmund should not be so rough. Besides, I don't care who or what the feller is, he's game.”

At this point the butler came forward with a great air of mystery.

“ It is the young man, my lord,” he said in a diplomatic undertone, “ who used to come to teach Miss Delia.”

“ Didn't know there was a young man who used to come to teach Miss Delia.”

“ Oh, yes, my lord. Her ladyship used to send a young college gentleman to teach her Greek and Latin.”

“ Nonsense, Porson. This can't be the feller.”

“ I beg your lordship's pardon, but it is impossible for me to be mistaken.”

“ Nonsense, my boy. Mr. Broke would not be such a damned fool.”

The old fellow pressed closer to his lordship's ear to impart an even more pregnant item of information.

“ What—what—what ! ”

Delia's uncle embodied his immense astonishment by throwing his legs apart, burying his hands in his pockets, looking comically down his nose and pursing his lips. For the best part of a minute he occupied this attitude, before he recorded his bewilderment in his favourite formula.

“ Well, I'm damned.”

The immediate business in hand having then recurred to him, he climbed into the dogcart and superintended the entrance into that high and awkward vehicle of the still only half-sensible young man. As he took the reins he called out to his man :

“ I shan't be back here to-day, Thompson. Borrow a mount and ride home.”

The dogcart started briskly on its way. Hardly had it

left the lodge gates of Covenden when an old and familiar vehicle hove in sight. It was the ramshackle omnibus returning from the garden-party. A sly but inveterately humorous leer appeared in the face of my lord when this rather absurd equipage waddled into the middle distance. He touched up his horse and determined to waste no time in getting past it. But the interior of the quaint chariot was furnished with seven pairs of feminine eyes.

"Why, it is Uncle Charles!" exclaimed the occupants excitedly one to another. "And, oh, there has been an accident! There is a man with him who is bleeding and smothered in bandages."

Delia was next but one to the door. In a moment she was up and clutching at the handle. But quick as she was her mother was quicker. She rose in almost the same instant and caught her by the wrist.

"Sit down, child," she said quietly.

Delia swayed a moment irresolute with the lumbering motions of the vehicle. She looked at her mother with something rather remarkable in her face.

"Sit down, child."

The tone was even quieter than before.

Delia obeyed. .

By this time the dogcart had passed on out of sight.

CHAPTER XXXIII

TRIBULATIONS OF A MIDDLE-AGED PEER AT THE HANDS OF WOMAN

BY the time Delia reached home things had resumed their normal course. Visible evidence there was none to testify to the occurrence of the extraordinary. In the demoralized state of her mind she was almost impelled at first to make inquiries of the servants, but reflection showed her the impossibility of such a course. Indeed, she hoped that this might be a matter of which they knew nothing; but whether they knew, or not, and whatever the agonizing suspense that was devouring her, she could not take them into her confidence on such a subject.

By evening she was persuaded—such was the ominous silence that was maintained by all—that she must await the next visit of her Uncle Charles. Scarcely a day went by without his putting in an appearance at Covenden, if he happened to be at home. Whatever it cost her to withstand those pangs that were tearing her heart into pieces, he was the only person she could consult. She might take the extreme course of putting a question to her father, but he would hardly be likely to answer it; and if he did answer it in the terms she foresaw he must, would not a terrible ordeal be presented to them both? Her curiosity had mounted to a passion, it was gnawing her to death, but with a young girl delicacy is sometimes stronger than death itself.

The bleeding man covered with bandages she had seen in the dogcart had confirmed her darkest fears. In her heart she felt it was not necessary to inquire what had taken place in the interval between her lover's coming to that house and his going from it. But the case was too grave

for circumstantial evidence. She was as sure as that there was a God in heaven that her father was guilty ; but in her was a sheer physical repugnance to convict him until irrefragable proof of his crime was laid before her eyes. Natural reverence for her father, which, when all was said, was still paramount in her, demanded that he should be given the benefit of every doubt. That is not the way of her sex as a rule. Instinct prompting it will take the shortest of cuts to the most inaccessible conclusions. But in the case of her father, so long as no eyewitness could be brought forward who was prepared to affirm what had taken place, she must not dare to judge him. And perhaps this unfeminine forbearance on the part of his youngest daughter was as true a compliment as the character of Broke ever received.

Nearly a week went by before Lord Bosket came to Covenden again.

During that period his unhappy young niece hardly laid her head on her pillow. As the days passed she felt that if soon she did not learn the truth she must die or lose her reason. She had no means of getting information. It was not possible to write to her lover. In those black days she hardly dared to think of him. Her first wish was to shut that bleeding image of him out of her mind. It was a hideous nightmare to which her imagination must not revert.

In the meantime the inquiries she could not bring herself to make had probably been made by others. For at least, dating from that tragic afternoon, life among her sisters would have been intolerable had she not been possessed by one all-dominating thought. She suffered a completer ostracism than ever. They neither spoke to her nor looked at her ; they shut the door of their common room against her ; they avoided her sedulously at meals. She was wholly debarred their pastimes and companionship ; and so thorough-going could they be when they chose, that like the name of their brother that of their youngest sister was banished from their lips. Their behaviour was formulated on the principle that she had no existence at all.

Her mother, however, was as usual. Her smile had as little

meaning as ever, and her epigrammatic silences as much. In her daily demeanour, that miracle of candour and suavity, there was nothing to suggest that there had been an "incident"; it was just as if their relations were exactly as they had always been. She might have been quite unversed in the art of suppressing letters, and intellectually incapable of reading the expression on the face of her daughter when she held her by the wrist to prevent her jumping from the omnibus.

The manner of her father was not much more eloquent. Maybe he was grimmer than of yore and sufficed more to himself. His great laugh was hardly ever heard now from the head of the table; something seemed to be lacking in the old spirit of camaraderie between him and his girls. To Delia at least he seemed no longer all tenderness and all simplicity. To her remorseless eyes it was as though he sat with a wolf gnawing at his vitals. The greyness of his hair had become much more noticeable of late; his cheeks were not so ruddy, they seemed to hang loose and flabby; he was ageing visibly. Nor did he carry his head quite as of yore. It had lost a little of its military trimness. Everything about him was become creased and relaxed, where formerly it was so alert, so finely braced, so full of self-esteem. Delia would have been shocked by the change in her father, which a few weeks had wrought, had it now been possible for her to be shocked by anything.

At last the morning came when she could entertain the hope of setting all doubts at rest. Her Uncle Charles waddled in among them just as they were finishing breakfast. His comings and goings were as casual as anything could be. He was there at all times and seasons, the first thing in the morning, the last thing at night, so that in the process of time a bedroom had become dedicated to his use, where the sheets were kept always aired for him. He had a latch-key of the hall door of Covenden against those occasions when he had no desire "to go home and face the music"; and it was nothing unusual for his feet to be heard stumbling up the stairs of his brother-in-law's residence in the small hours of the morning.

"Top o' the mornin'," he said, as he took a seat at the table in the midst of the family, and summoned the assiduous Porson by the simple expedient of holding up a finger.

"You can get me a mornin' prayer, Porson."

As Porson retired on this errand he was recalled peremptorily.

"Did I say a devilled kidney as well?"

"No, your lordship."

"Well, I meant to. A mornin' prayer and a devilled kidney."

Porson had proceeded but a little farther on his pious mission when he was recalled even more peremptorily.

"I'll have the prayer, Porson, but never mind the kidney. I've got a tongue this mornin' like the bottom of a parrot's cage."

Porson bowed.

On this occasion he got as far as the sideboard, whereupon he was adjured to "Look lively, there's a good feller."

A "mornin' prayer" proved to be a polite euphemism for a large tumbler, a decanter of whisky, and a bottle of mineral water. Lord Bosket proceeded to mix these ingredients in the nice proportions amenable to a palate that was "like the bottom of a parrot's cage."

It was to be gathered from the querulous air of Uncle Charles that his domestic life had suffered yet another check to its harmony.

"The missis is back from town on the rampage. And all about nothin', mark you. There'd be an excuse for her if I was a wrong 'un, which I'm not; she can't say that I haven't always been a good husband to her. And what do you suppose it's all about this time? Why, simply because durin' her absence from home I arranged a little glove fight in the park, a snug little mill and nothin' more. Quite an informal little affair, don't you know, between two middle-weights of the district for a small purse subscribed by myself and a few friends. We were goin' to have no press, no publicity. It was goin' to be quite private, tickets by invitation, everything very select and all as right as rain. But God bless my soul, you should ha' seen the old pet when

she got to hear of it. It was a degradation of the highest and purest instincts of the Lord knows what! One-sided, I call it. I stand her poets and socialists without a word, absolutely without a word, mark you. We've had anarchists and labour leaders and Fenians in the house before now, but I can't even go rattin' in a ditch with a terrier pup on a Sunday mornin' but what she calls down fire from heaven. And that's not all; she's got another grievance now. Somebody has told her a cock-and-bull story about Billy havin' turned up his commission in the Blues, and she swears I've kept it from her. It was no use my sayin' it was all my eye and Betty Martin; she says it is a conspiracy to keep her in the dark. You had better let her know, Jane, that she's found a mare's nest; but her common sense ought to tell her."

"On the contrary, Charles, I am afraid Emma is very well informed," said his sister. "He could not afford the Blues any longer. Too expensive, you know."

"What, my gal?"

The face of Uncle Charles was a perfect blank.

"That's a nice thing! Rough on a feller, that is, especially a young feller. He oughtn't to ha' done that. Why didn't you speak to me about it? I dare say I could have arranged to do something in an important matter like that."

"You are very good, Charles, but we really felt we could not hold ourselves indebted to you to any further extent. You have been too generous already."

"If I can't give my own nephew a leg up, it's a pity. For him to do a thing like that touches me a lot more than a few pounds a year towards his keep would ha' done."

"That is only part of the reason."

"Well, it is a very serious thing for a young feller at his time of life, let me tell you. And what's he goin' into now—the police force?"

"He has left England."

"Wha-a-a-t!"

"He sailed for South Africa last Wednesday week."

Lord Bosket sat bolt upright in his chair, with his glass suspended midway to his lips.

"That's the limit!" was all he could say.

The silence around the breakfast-table was rather painful.

"You had no right to let him go. That lad's as much to me as he is to you, by God he is!"

The face of Billy's uncle was pathetic in its consternation. The silence of all around him continued.

"I'm fairly knocked over," he said. "And this Maud Wayling scheme—all off, I suppose?"

"Yes, Charles, it is," said Mrs. Broke impassively.

For a time her brother rocked himself to and fro in his chair, pursing his lips and shaking his head from side to side at intervals.

"It's the rottenest thing I ever heard in my life. You have both done a very wrong thing."

Lord Bosket's distress was unbridled. That of his hearers must have been quite as acute; but tact was not the strong point of that forthright soul. Broke might sit grim and grey in an inaccessible silence; his wife might fence and parry and make obvious attempts to turn the conversation; the girls might all be staring straight in front of them with faces that grew white and scarlet by turns; but signals such as these were not for Lord Bosket. As was usual with him, when he was in pain he wanted it to be shared by others, in the same generous way that he was prepared to take the sufferings of others on himself.

At the first convenient moment Mrs. Broke rose from the table and left the room. The girls, in great distress as they were, promptly took advantage of their mother's action to make good their own escape. Broke also followed out gloomily upon their heels, so that in less than a minute the aggrieved Lord Bosket was left to conduct his soliloquy to the glass of whisky in front of him.

"It's the limit!" he continued to repeat at automatic intervals, with his legs sprawling under the table, his chin on his breast, and his hands thrust into the pockets of his breeches.

To him in the midst of his soliloquy came the youngest of his nieces with a rather white face. The butler and a satellite were clearing away the breakfast things.

"Porson, will you leave the room for a few minutes, please?" said Delia in a tone of the oddest precision which was quite unlike the one she used as a rule. "I will ring the bell when I have spoken with his lordship. We are not to be interrupted, please."

She waited for them to go, and noticing a key in the door of the room, she took the precaution of turning it.

Her Uncle Charles had sat with his back to her while these manœuvres were going forward. She now came and took a seat opposite to him, leaned her elbows on the table, and looked at him in a concentrated manner with her chin resting on her hands.

"Hullo, young 'un," said her Uncle Charles, with a start. "I didn't notice *you* there. I thought you had all gone. What do *you* think of this business? Don't you think it is very wrong and mons'rous? I suppose I ought not to say so to you young fillies; but I can't help speakin' as I feel. Wrong and mons'rous, I call it."

Delia made no reply.

"They won't tell me all, young 'un; but I mean to know. I have a right to know. I am the young feller's uncle, do you see; he's the only nephew I've got; and I was very proud of that feller. He was the apple of my eye. Good-looking, straightfor'ard, cheery, manly young feller. I expect it's that Maud Wayling. I predicted trouble at the start. I've said to your mother all along it would be a mistake if she tried to force his hand."

There was a keen pity in the face of Delia, which was generally there when her Uncle Charles "was in one of his moods." She waited for him to cease speaking; and when he had done so, she said in a perfectly quiet and contained voice:

"Uncle Charles, did you see that accident the other day?"

"Accident? What accident?"

"The accident to the man who was covered in blood. Don't you remember he was in your dogcart when you drove past us in the lane the other day?"

"Oh, that!"

The face of Uncle Charles grew full of strange meaning. A chill spread slowly over Delia's veins.

"It was not an accident, Uncle Charles?"

"I did not say so, young 'un."

"Please tell me, Uncle Charles, how it happened."

Lord Bosket grew wary. He was not the type of man who is likely to be overborne by a superfluity of wisdom, but the look upon his niece's face would have been a warning to the most obtuse uncle in the world. Besides, in a dim fashion he recalled to his mind that old Porson, or somebody, had made a rather odd comment on the affair at the time of its occurrence. He was not exactly a Solomon, but somehow he felt it behoved him to walk delicately.

"Oh, yes, young 'un," he said, affecting a lightness of tone that would hardly have deceived an infant in arms, "it may have been an accident."

"It was not an accident, Uncle Charles."

Delia made this announcement in a tone that had a rather uncomfortable amount of decision in it. Somehow her face was not altogether nice to look at.

"Wasn't it?" said her uncle, with admirable caution.

"Did you see it, Uncle Charles?"

"A bit of it. I may have seen a bit of it."

"Please tell me what you saw."

"I—I don't think I ought, young 'un. Little gals should not be so inquisitive, what?"

"It was not an accident at all, Uncle Charles."

"Wasn't it?"

"You are trying to deceive me, Uncle Charles."

"Why should I try to deceive you, you silly little fool?"

"Because it was not an accident."

"Well, I never said it was, did I? But whatever it was, Miss Muffett, be guided by me and think no more about it."

"You must please tell me what happened, Uncle Charles."

"You must please forget all about it, Miss Poppet. I dare say it gave you all a bit of a shock to come on a bleeding man suddenly like that; but what's the odds? It is no business of anybody's. Your father——"

“ My father ? ” said Delia.

Lord Bosket saw his mistake almost before he had made it. But his niece had pounced upon it like a hawk already.

“ My father ? ”

“ Never mind your father ; we will drop the subject, eh ? Little gals should not worry their silly heads about things they can't understand, eh ? Now be a good and sensible little gal, and the very next time I come I will bring you a four-pound box of chocolates from Gunter's, the biggest they keep and the best quality.”

“ What did my father do ? ”

“ I don't know,” said Lord Bosket, with a lame and somewhat hurried recourse to his tumbler.

“ You do know, Uncle Charles, and I insist that you tell me.”

On Delia's side there was close-breathing quietude that was extraordinary. The demand, made without emotion of any kind, admitted of no compromise.

“ Damn it all ! ” said Lord Bosket, beginning to wriggle in his chair. He was growing very uncomfortable. “ You ought not to ask me, you know, and I ought not to tell you.”

“ I insist, Uncle Charles.”

The unyielding face, still propped on the stiff hands, was so calm that it began to have a kind of baleful attraction for the uneasy person whose glass shook in his hand. It was the rummest face he had ever seen on anybody, man or woman.

“ You mustn't ask me, you know. It is not good for little gals to know everything.”

“ My father insulted him and afterwards struck him.”

“ I did not say so, young 'un, and you can't say I did.”

“ You shall not deny it, Uncle Charles.”

“ Who said I wanted to deny it, you silly little fool ? Why should I ? What's the odds one way or the other ? Even if your father did cut up rough, he wouldn't without the best of reasons, would he ? Come now, let it go at that, and don't trouble your silly little head about it any more ; and be a good little gal.”

“ You admit it, Uncle Charles ? ”

Lord Bosket looked at his niece with whimsical but rather bleared eyes. It had come to something when a niece not much bigger than a pussy cat was able to browbeat a man of his age. But yet he felt he had not a thousand-to-one chance against her. This was the solidest chip of determination he had ever seen. She had got a will to her that was worth that of ten men such as himself. He had never seen any woman with a face like that; he was damned if he would not rather have had to face the missis at her worst !

“ You admit it, Uncle Charles ? ”

“ Well, and suppose I do, what’s the odds, you funny little fool ? You can take it from me that your father had good reasons for anything he did.”

“ He attacked a defenceless man ; a man weaker than himself and smaller.”

The tone continued to be perfectly calm and unemotional.

“ Rubbish. Don’t think about it in that way, you little silly. It is not a thing to make a song about. It is nothing at all, take it from me. I dare say the feller was insolent.”

“ You do not know that, Uncle Charles ; and one ought not to say what one does not know to be the truth.”

“ No, I suppose one ought not.”

He was completely taken aback for a moment by the manner of his young niece. All at once it made him laugh.

“ But we are gettin’ to be a rum little devil, aren’t we. This is not the little Miss Muffett I used to know, quiet as a mouse, and as simple as a baby. If you go on like this, miss, you will be a terror, you will. You haven’t been taking lessons from your Aunt Emma for nothin’, you’ve not ; when you run your match with her you won’t run second, you won’t ! You are a little devil. Still, we won’t worry our heads any more about it, will we ? As I say, what’s the odds ? Your father should be a judge of his own affairs. Little gals must not bother their heads about ’em. Now, Miss Poppet, not another word ; and you shall have those chocolates the very next time I come.”

In this delicately wise and paternal fashion the subject was dismissed. Delia unlocked the door and went out of the room. Lord Bosket continued to confront his glass for some little time afterwards. Somehow his thoughts would continue to revert to the singular interview he had just had with the youngest of all his nieces ; and for the time being they overlay those in regard to his nephew so recently in his mind. To find such an air of mystery about one of his " little chestnut fillies " was something quite new ; they were such simple people, as frank and open as the day. The young 'un defeated him altogether. He could not remember to have seen a woman look like that before, and he did not want to see one look like it again. It had rather upset him, damn it all !

This sense of discomfort continued to linger in his mind, when, after breakfast, he went his way. Still, he did not impart his doubts to anybody, because, after all, the interview might have sprung from no more than childish curiosity ; and Delia's manner might have owed its strangeness to the way in which the sight of a bleeding man had wrought on a susceptible mind. Women were rather squeamish in such matters ; and the fact that her father had hit another man might perhaps have hurt her sense of delicacy. Indeed, the only terms in which Lord Bosket permitted himself to refer to the subject at all was when he said to Broke privately as he was on the point of quitting the house :

" Have you had a police-court summons yet, Edmund ? If I am on the bench, my boy, I shall be dead against you."

Broke smiled a grim acknowledgment of the joke.

At the luncheon-table Mrs. Broke commented on the absence of Delia. Did anybody know why she was not there ? Was she unwell ? Nobody knew. She had not been seen since breakfast. The matter was pursued no farther at that time. Most probably she was sulking in her bedroom. They believed her to be capable of almost any enormity.

Her absence from that pious rite, afternoon tea, was not noticed, because she was still forbidden their common room. But when dinner-time came and she was still absent, her

mother's inquiries grew more insistent. A maid was sent to her room, only to return with the news that she was not there.

As the hours passed that evening, and the child did not return, a feeling of uneasiness grew abroad. It became a subject of comment that she had been rather strange in her manner of late. Instances were recalled. Reminiscences came unbidden to their minds of the singular attitude she had adopted on many questions that did not admit of two points of view. But not for a moment, however, did they condescend to follow their speculations to their logical, their natural, their inevitable conclusion. They were face to face with her absence. It could only be accounted for on one assumption; and that was just the one their dignity forbade them to make. The grotesque idea was in the minds of them all; but to admit for a single moment that her strange unhappiness had induced her to run away from home was impossible. Any such admission would be a treason against the clan.

After Mrs. Broke had made strenuous inquiries of the servants, the butler was able to recall a fact that was invested now with much significance. He mentioned Miss Delia's ordering George and himself to leave the room while they were clearing away breakfast, in order that she might have a private interview with his lordship, who was still seated at the table.

"And if I am not mistaken, ma'am, she locked the door when we left the room."

"You have no idea, Porson, what Miss Delia said to his lordship?"

Porson had not. Thereupon Mrs. Broke, true to her instinct for action in times of crisis, sent a messenger to Hipsley for the purpose of summoning her brother to Covenden at once.

The man returned in something under an hour with the news that Lord Bosket was from home and that nothing had been seen or heard of him all day. In the meantime inquiries at the porter's lodge had elicited the fact that Delia had been seen to pass through the gates at a quarter-past

ten that morning. No attention had been paid to the direction she had taken and she had not been seen to return.

On the stroke of midnight, however, their more immediate anxieties were allayed by the arrival of a telegram. It ran :
" Filly all right. Letter in the morning.. Charles."

It had been handed in in London.

CHAPTER XXXIV

PROVIDENTIAL BEHAVIOUR OF OLD PEARCE

LORD BOSKET'S wanderings in quest of an alleviation to his lot took him in the course of that afternoon to a cricket match some ten miles off. His taste had the all-embracing catholicity of the born sportsman. Wherever two sides met or one living thing was pitted against another, the contest was sure of his patronage. Two spiders on a hot plate, or a pair of mongrels in an entry, provided one was matched against the other, were enough to excite his lust for finding the winner. Therefore three o'clock this summer afternoon found him mingling with the throng in Bushmills Park that was witnessing the first innings of the Free Foresters in their game with I Zingari.

His arrival on the ground was a signal for mild commotion. Acquaintances of his own sex slapped him on the back and acclaimed him from every possible quarter. Long-field-on, in the middle of his after-luncheon doze against the extreme edge of the bowling screen, awoke sufficiently to cry, "Hullo, Bos!" Acquaintances of the opposite sex sat up and purred, confided gloved hands to him, and by fluctuations of their drapery so delicate as hardly to be perceptible, gave graceful indications that there was room for dear Lord Bosket to come and sit beside them. Everybody fêted him. He was buttonholed by this person and that. His friends were three-deep around him in the luncheon tent, whither he had been escorted by another body of his friends to have a drink.

There is no man who enjoys the popularity of him with a reputation for "manners of the heart." This gift of heaven

makes its appeal to all sorts and conditions of men. Lord Bosket's *naïveté* was an oasis in the desert of a self-satisfied austerity. Old Bos was not so confoundedly superior. A reputation of this kind stood him in far better stead than the most brilliant intellectual gifts or a life of virgin purity. Where the amiable weaknesses of another would not have been condoned, no cause of offence was to be found in this popular idol.

In the course of an hour Lord Bosket had disengaged himself from several groups of these clamorous persons, ultimately to fall into the clutches of a celebrated sporting baronet who lived in the neighbourhood. There are generally two characteristics which are held to distinguish members of this honourable order; they are invariably "sporting," and almost as invariably "celebrated." This one was of the true genus who keeps more "gees" in his stable than he does in his vocabulary. He was of the most familiar type of celebrated sporting baronet that tradition has made dear, which affects a high and square felt hat, snuff-coloured clothes, a horseshoe pin, and brown gaiters. For the rest he had the ruddy bluff look of a yeoman farmer, with brusquerie and absence of manners to match.

"How are you, Bos?" he said heartily. "Fine day for the race."

"Devilish," said my lord. "Come and have a drink."

"Don't mind. I've got something to tell on, only I can't think what it is."

"Fancy anything for the July meetin'?"

"The Dwarf; and Gub Gub for a place. Now, what is it I want to tell you? Something—something funny."

"Seen the weights for Newmarket?"

"No. Now I've got it. A sing'lar thing I saw this mornin'. One of those nieces of yours."

"What, what, Pearce?" said Lord Bosket. "Something had given a great leap under his waistcoat."

"I think it must have been the youngest of 'em, if I remember 'em right."

"Well, well, Pearce!" The athletic performance under Lord Bosket's waistcoat had been repeated.

" I met her walkin' along the high-road covered up to the neck in dust."

" When—this mornin' ? Nothing very funny in that."

" You hold on a bit, my son. I'm comin' to the funny part. She stopped me and said, ' If you please, is this the way to London ? ' I told her if she walked another forty miles or so along it, she would find herself about there. If she had started from her place she must have walked more than ten already, and a broilin' hot day. I couldn't understand it at all. It seemed a sing'lar thing for one of your little chestnuts to ask a question like that, and to ask it as though she meant to do every yard of the distance on her flat feet. I wanted to tell you, Bos ; in my opinion it's a thing you ought to know."

" It couldn't ha' been one o' my fillies."

Conviction was grievously lacking in the tone of Delia's uncle.

" Don't you bother your head about that, my boy. Do you think I don't know one of that kennel when I see one ? Her nose was one of the old pattern, or my eyesight's failin'. Edmund himself doesn't carry a better."

" Go on, Pearce, nose isn't everything."

" It is with that kennel, my boy. I'll own when I first saw her I thought she was too handsome to be one of your litter. She'd got two eyes to her like a pair of stars, and that blue the sky was a fool to 'em. She was a nailer. I don't mind tellin' you, Bos, that when I saw that thoroughbred tit of yours marching along with her chin up, and as proud and dainty on her feet as a three-year-old, I thought her a stepper."

Delia's uncle gave vent to his feelings in a whistle that was very deep and long.

" Well, I am damned ! Come and have a drink, Pearce. This is a nice how-d'ye-do ! "

A further libation in the tent brought no comfort to Delia's uncle. Her behaviour at the breakfast-table had been bitten too sharply in his mind. He began to blame himself bitterly, as his habit was when things went awry, on the score of his own folly. He ought to have known she was up to

something. He ought to have known that no little filly had a right to look as she had looked that morning. She might well have a rum manner, if she had made up her mind to run away from home. But he could not believe one of his nieces to be capable of such an act. They were the last people in the world to do such a thing. What would her father say? Whatever had possessed her!

In the course of the next quarter of an hour his mind, shackled in whisky as it was, had led him to conclude that there was only one thing to do. He must go after her at once. The road to London ran by the gates of Bushmills Park, and London was clearly her destination. As he climbed into his trap and took the reins from his man, and trotted away on his absurd errand, the incredible folly of the little fool recurred to him. To walk forty miles to London in the blazing heat of a midsummer day was the maddest thing he had ever heard. If she wanted to get there, why did she not have the ordinary common sense to go by train? The little fool must be mad!

He would like to ask also what she proposed to do when she got there. She would not be likely to go to her friends, mad as she was, for that would only be to be packed straight back home again. But that was the only project she could have in her mind. It was clear that a mere whim had possessed her; that the heat of her folly would soon grow cool, and that she would soon return to the fold. But she would catch it pretty hot when she did go home, if he knew anything of her father! And there was not the least doubt in the mind of Lord Bosket that women were rum 'uns when they liked. His young niece had wormed a secret out of him that she had no right to hear; and to express her opinion of it, she calmly ran away from home. He could see very clearly now that by hook or by crook he ought to have contrived to keep back the truth.

As he passed the milestones on the dusty road, the face and manner of his niece recurred to him vividly and perpetually. Of course, he ought to have known that mischief was brewing. The little tit had no right to that sort of look. At the breakfast-table it had disconcerted him; and it came out

at him now through the broad sunlight, and through the dusty hedges that skirted the highway, in a fashion that made him as thoroughly uncomfortable as when he saw it first that morning.

As the raking stride of the horse took him up hill and down dale, and devoured the endless undulating ribbon of white road, doubt invaded him. He might, after all, be on a wild goose chase. When you looked at it reasonably the thing seemed impossible. If it should turn out a mere cock-and-bull story on the part of old Pearce how it would be told against him! Still, old Pearce was not that sort of feller. He had been very circumstantial about it too, and he was the last man in the world to make an ass of himself in that way. All the same, by the time his horse's stride had devoured a dozen miles or so of the dusty road, the absurdity of his errand grew more apparent and its sanity grew less.

Nevertheless, he continued to go on. The phantom of that child's face lured him forward mile by mile, long after cold reason had demanded that he should return. But no, he would see this thing through. They might have the laugh of him afterwards, very likely they would, but the sportsman in him was enough of itself to take him all the way. He stopped twice at wayside inns, ostensibly to seek information of a young gal walking the road to London, but also to obtain a little light refreshment in a liquid form. Of the one they were able to give him cheerfully; of the other, alas! they had nothing to supply.

By the time the dogcart had covered twenty miles the sun had taken a very decided dip. It was a perfect evening of early summer. Mellow light suffused the clover. Not a leaf stirred by the roadside, so absolutely still was the air. The motionless trees cast their long shadows in the dust. Now and then a blackbird hovered over hedges, an occasional hare ran along the road, and rabbits raced in all directions, hoisting their little white scuts. It began to grow dusk.

The dubious tints of the twilight were reflected powerfully in Lord Bosket. A milestone told him that twelve miles further on he would be at Charing Cross. The odds were very great now against his finding or overtaking his quarry. Still he

was going all the way. He would never hear the last of the story they would tell against him—that he drove to town on a summer's evening from Bushmills Park because old Pearce had told him a cock-and-bull story about one of his nieces asking the way to London.

Still he was going all the way. To that end he eased the paces of his horse. He looked at his watch ; it wanted five-and-twenty minutes to nine o'clock. As nearly as he could calculate he had now come twenty-five miles from Bushmills Park ; about thirty-five from Hipsley ; and thirty-seven and a half from Covenden. It was hardly likely that she had walked so far through all this dust, in such a broiling day of midsummer. The odds were a thousand to five that he had missed her, or that she had never come.

His hopefulness was not increased by the fact that he was beginning to feel decidedly hungry. It was already past the hour at which he preferred to dine ; and it would be a good six miles yet before he touched the suburbs of London. Hereabouts he came to a hill ; and in walking up his horse he met a farmer in a covered cart coming down.

" I say," he called out, " have you met a young gal along the road ? Don't happen to have seen one, do you ? "

" Aye," said the farmer, " that I have. I passed one about a quarter of a mile back, covered in dust about as white as a miller. Looks as though she's been tramping it all day. She's that lame she can hardly put one foot afore the other. Better give her a lift, gov'nor, if you are going her way. Her goose is about cooked, I reckon."

" Well, I am damned," said Lord Bosket, pressing on.

The sun was much lower now. The golden crimson with which all the sky behind him had been painted had deepened to tints more complex. There was the faint outline of a moon. The evening was growing chill. Faced by a stiffer hill than usual, he took his tired horse carefully to the top. On the crest a heap of flints for road-mending purposes had been shot beside a hedge, and seated on them was the little figure of a woman.

She was clad from head to foot in a mantle of dust, about as white as a miller, as the farmer had said. She was

breathing hard ; there was not a speck of colour in her face ; she had taken off her straw hat, but her hair, a charming fawn colour, had not lost its ordered look. Her distressed state was cruelly apparent, and the limp lines into which her small figure fell caused Lord Bosket to give a grunt of dismay.

Delia did not see her uncle at first. Her eyes were turned towards the long and deep valley into which this hill ran down. They were fixed with a concentrated intensity on the stretch of white road, ankle-deep in dust, on which the shadows were beginning to creep darker and darker : the road to London. Her hands were clasped round her knees. Hearing the sound of wheels hard by, she turned her head in such a way as to denote the acute pain she was suffering. Without looking at vehicle or driver, she asked :

“ How far to London, please ? ”

“ You damned young fool ! ” was the answer she received.

Already it had struck Lord Bosket with dismay that the tone in which she asked the question was that of their interview at the breakfast-table. She did not appear to recognize the voice of her uncle, but at his words she turned her head towards him with a bewildered expression. The intolerable weariness of her face had something of the grey look of death.

Lord Bosket was already out of his dogcart.

“ You damned young fool ! ” he said roughly.

Delia did not reply. Her lips were pressed very tight together, and somehow she did not seem to have the power to force them apart.

Her Uncle Charles, meeting with no response, stood in front of her in his favourite attitude, with his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his breeches. He looked her over keenly. She was dead beat.

“ Poor little gal.”

He then gave vent to a peculiar long-drawn whistle. His next act was to take from an inside pocket of his covert coat a flask containing his favourite stimulant.

“ Down with it,” he said gruffly.

Delia seized the cup with something akin to ferocity, and

without giving the slightest heed to the contents, drank eagerly.

"Poor little gal," said Lord Bosket, speaking in the manner of one who suffers from a sore throat.

There was that in her act which suddenly brought the tears to his eyes. He wiped them ruefully with a red handkerchief, and then blew his nose with great violence.

"I am old enough to know better," he muttered to his man as he turned away abruptly from the cause of all this inconvenience. Presently, having resumed a sufficient command of himself to venture to address his young niece, who still sat motionless on the heap of stones, he proceeded to do so in a voice of hoarse expostulation :

"You have walked forty miles as near as damn it, in all that broilin' sun, and if you have not about done for yourself it's God's mercy, that's all I've got to say about it. I will drive you into London, and we shall have to go home by train in the mornin'. You are in no condition to go back to-night. We must have you between the blankets as soon as we can. It is the maddest business I ever heard of in my life. However, this is not the time for talk. Into the trap with you."

He made to take the small figure in his arms, for the purpose of hoisting it into the vehicle, as it showed no signs of moving of its own accord.

"Please, Uncle Charles, you are not to touch me."

Her tone and manner were as extraordinarily uncompromising as they were at nine o'clock that morning.

"What, what?" said her uncle, taken aback.

Delia did not move an inch. Lord Bosket approached indecisively.

"Please do not touch me, Uncle Charles."

"Not touch you, you young fool! I ought to be cuttin' you in half, miss, if I was doin' the right thing by you. Not touch you, indeed!"

As her uncle stretched out his hand to seize her, in the tentative manner he might seize a kitten, she made a little motion by which she gathered her dust-laden skirts away from him.

"You must leave me, Uncle Charles. I must not, I cannot go with you."

Her tone was absolutely final. Already Lord Bosket was fully conscious of his impotence before it.

"Nonsense; never heard such a thing in my life. Where do you think you are goin', and what do you think is goin' to become of you? You can't stop here all night, that's a certainty."

"You will take me to Covenden."

"Of course, to-morrow."

"I can never go to Covenden again."

Once more Lord Bosket had recourse to a long-drawn whistle. He did not know in the least how to handle such an uncompromising determination. He was not fitted by nature to do so. Here in this overdriven bit of a thing was a problem that he had neither the wit to understand nor the strength to grapple with.

"You've damn well got to, miss," he said.

Delia, however, stuck quietly to the other view.

"Come, don't be a little silly. Let me put you into the trap."

"I will not be put into the trap, Uncle Charles."

"Rubbish. You don't know what you are sayin'. Come, now, be a sensible little gal, and when you get home I will give you a nice new horse with four white stockings."

Lord Bosket, completely baffled, held out his hand with a gesture half of anger, half of cajolery. Delia closed her eyes and hugged her knees tighter.

"Come on, there's a good little gal."

He approached her in the wary manner of a cat stalking a bird, and suddenly put his arms round her. She was very cold and trembling violently.

"I forbid you to touch me, Uncle Charles."

She began to struggle fitfully in her uncle's irresolute grasp. Her heart was beating wildly through her dress.

"I will jump out of the trap," she said.

With all this decision of language and behaviour in one ordinarily so docile, there was a complete absence of emotion. Her manner was so calm that Lord Bosket was rather dis-

concerted by it. It struck him as rather uncanny. He did not know whether the poor little devil had been touched a bit by the sun or what, but this was certainly not the timid petted little filly he had always known. There was a dreary piteousness about her too that made him take in his breath rather sharply. He would be quite justified in resorting to compulsion in a case of this kind ; but even as he gathered himself to make use of it a sudden nausea came upon him. No, he was hanged if he could be rough with her. Even if her parents afterwards blamed him bitterly, he somehow did not feel equal to anything in the nature of violence.

" You must tell me all about it, then," he said, in tones which, in spite of himself, were conciliatory. Then realizing somewhat to his dismay that they were of that nature when they were certainly not intended to be so, he gave himself up to luxury. He drew her cold face to his coat and gave it a hug. " Tell your damned old fool of an uncle all about it, you poor little soul. No harm shall come to you, I'll give you my word."

" Promise, Uncle Charles, you will not take me to Coven-den." She allowed her wan cheek to lie an instant against him and closed her eyes.

" I can't do that. I would if I could, but I mustn't, you know. I'm bound to see you home all right."

Delia, half insensible in his arms from the combined effects of hunger, weariness, and thirst, remained absolutely inexorable on that point. More and more fully did Lord Bosket realize that his clay was not anything like stern enough to cope with such a stony resolution. He saw clearly that unless he gave his promise no progress was possible. Things would remain at a deadlock, and already it was nearly pitch dark. " She ought to have a proper good hidin', but I'm hanged if I can give it her," he recorded for his own personal information as he hugged her tighter to his coat.

" Come, come, miss, no damn nonsense ! "

Gently he tried to lift her. At once she began to struggle convulsively.

" Promise, Uncle Charles."

" I can't, you know. I mustn't, you know."

" Leave me, then, Uncle Charles. I must go on alone."

With a quickness that was amazing she had slipped his grasp.

Lord Bosket knew already that he was defeated. Good nature is an asset from the social point of view, but there are occasions in life when it would seem to have its drawbacks also.

" Very well, then," he said gruffly, " I give in ; I promise ; I chuck up the sponge."

" You promise also not to take me to Grosvenor Street, Uncle Charles ? "

" I may be a fool, but I am not a damned fool, I hope," said my lord with some alacrity. The undesirability of his own house as a place of refuge hardly required to be stated.

" Where are we to go, Uncle Charles ? "

" God knows ! "

On the strength of this assurance Delia climbed up into the dogcart. It caused her uncle to shed more curses to observe, as she did so, that she was dead lame. Twice she nearly missed her foothold on the awkward step, and when at last she got into the vehicle she fell against the seat. It was still a soft-breathing summer evening, but faintly chill, yet her uncle was surprised to find how cold she was as she nestled in the small space between him and the man. He took off his covert coat, wrapped her in it, placed one arm tenderly round her, and drew her cold cheeks against his jacket.

" If you must go to London, why did you walk, you little fool ? "

That absurd but palpable fact was something he could not dismiss from his mind.

" I had no money," said Delia simply.

" As rotten a reason as ever I heard. Why didn't you borrow a bit ? "

Certainly such a reason was very odd and inadequate. But there could be no doubt that as far as it went it was a sufficient one. Suddenly a new thought started up in Lord Bosket to harrow his well-fed feelings.

" You are not goin' to tell me that you have been baking in the sun since ten o'clock this mornin' without a crumb to peck or a drop to drink ? "

" Yes," said Delia.

" Well, that's won it ! "

Once again Lord Bosket with hoarse vehemence swore. " No money ; nothing to eat ! " he repeated several times under his breath, apparently to impress the incredible fact on his mind.

" Shove along, Thompson," he said to the man impatiently.

" Where, your lordship ? "

" Better ask me another. I give it up. I can't take her to the club and I can't take her to Grosvenor Street. I suppose we had better point for one of those barracks in Northumberland Avenue. Shove on, my lad ; poor old Bendy looks like havin' a bellyful this time if he never had it before."

" And where were you goin' to even if you got as far as the metropolis ? if I might make so bold as to inquire," the querulous and bewildered gentleman demanded of his niece.

Delia did not reply.

" Come, out with it. You've got my word, haven't you ? I shall not give you away, you poor little devil."

As a token of her confidence in him Delia answered : " I was going to No. 403 Charing Cross Road."

" And who the devil lives at 403 Charing Cross Road ? "

" It is the office of the *International Review*."

" Oh, indeed ! Very interestin' bit of information. But I don't quite see what that was goin' to do for you."

" Mr. Porter is on the staff of the *International Review*."

" Oh, indeed ! Very interesting too. And very nice for the *International Review*. But who the deuce is Mr. Porter ? "

Now that Delia was committed to her statement she did not flinch from making it.

" Mr. Porter loves me, Uncle Charles."

" Oh, does he ! " said her Uncle Charles. " Very good of

Mr. Porter, I'm sure. But I don't quite follow. What the devil has all this got to do with your runnin' away from home?"

"I love him," said Delia, with her singular precision of manner and phrase.

"Oh, do you! Nice for Mr. Porter."

Lord Bosket could not repress a rather weary guffaw which he proceeded to impart to the air of the night.

"These are all very excellent reasons, miss, I don't doubt; and I dare say it is because I am such a fuddle-headed sort of a feller that I don't see what they have to do with the matter at all. You walk forty miles on the hottest day of the year, with not a crumb to eat or a drop to drink, and not a sou in your pocket, in order that if you are lucky you will be able to drop down dead on the doorstep of a locked-up newspaper office in the Charing Cross Road about midnight. I dare say I am rather wooden-headed, but I am damned if I can quite see——"

Lord Bosket finished his somewhat impassioned summing up of the case as it presented itself to his judicial mind with a deep but wholly irrelevant malediction. For a ray of light had burst upon him at last. There was the whole thing. Porter was the young man over whom Edmund had made such an ass of himself. Once more Lord Bosket issued his peculiar, long-drawn whistle to the air of the night.

Yes, there was the whole matter as plain as your hand. And a nice how-d'ye-do it was! There would be the devil to pay. He had let himself in for a good thing, hanged if he had not! The sense of his position oppressed him acutely. If ever he had any tact, any delicacy, any worldly wisdom—and very grievously did he doubt whether he had ever had any of these desirable qualities—he must prepare to use them now. Edmund could be an ugly brute when once you got his blood up. And it seemed that this fragile slip of a thing, not much bigger than your hat, was no unworthy daughter of such a sire. She would have died on that heap of flints by the side of the road rather than go back to her home.

However, this was not the time to dwell on the dilemma in

which he found himself involved. The lamp-posts of suburban London were already flitting past ; it had become quite dark ; and the cold burden in his arms had grown a good deal heavier. His immediate thoughts must be for that worn-out and famished slip of womanhood nestling to his coat for warmth, who, dead lame and starving as she was, was prepared to die rather than give in.

“ It’s God’s mercy I met old Pearce ! Poor little gal ! Poor little gal ! Rum cattle, women, when they like ! ”

Hardly had he uttered this pearl of wisdom for his own consolation, when a new discovery obtruded itself upon him. His young niece was become insensible in his arms.

CHAPTER XXXV

IN WHICH WE FIND THE FIRST COMEDIAN ONCE MORE IN A
HAPPY VEIN

THE letter Lord Bosket addressed to Covenden at a late hour that evening from an hotel in Northumberland Avenue, was the longest and most singular he had ever felt called upon to pen in the whole course of his unliterary life. With a sure instinct that was worth more than a superficial observation of men and things, he addressed this lucubration to his sister rather than to Delia's father. A superficial observer would have had no hesitation in saying that the child was far less likely to meet with tender handling from her mother, than from him whose affection for his girls, one and all, was so great ; but her uncle's instinct taught him better. And instinct is a strange matter.

When on the following morning Mrs. Broke found an envelope addressed in her brother's crude hand, at the side of her plate, she smiled faintly to observe its bulk. As a rule Lord Bosket conducted his correspondence by telegraph. History was indeed getting itself written at a furious pace when in a single day he had recourse to eight pages of hotel writing-paper to keep up with the march of events.

Lord Bosket began his letter with the assurance that he, and he alone, was to blame for what had occurred. Had he only used discretion things might have been otherwise. He had inadvertently let drop at the breakfast-table that morning the details of a certain incident with which Edmund was very well acquainted. My lord then proceeded to give a résumé of the providential behaviour of old Pearce at the cricket match ; the subsequent pursuit and capture of

the runaway ; and he went on to draw a vivid picture of the state Delia was in physically and mentally, and laid stress on the fact, with the aid of double lines under the words, that " she had walked forty miles as near as damn it," without a penny in her pocket to buy food or drink ; without protection from the sun ; and that, dead lame as she was, had it not been by God's mercy that he had overtaken her, there was that in her that would have carried her on until she fell down dead upon the road.

Her uncle concluded with an appeal. He was sure that her mother would see the thing in a proper light, and make things as easy for the poor little devil as she could ; but somehow he had not the same confidence in Edmund. Edmund had a heart of gold, provided you did not put his back up, but if once you did that he was about the most unreasonable man in the world. She must do what she could to get him not to be too hard on the little filly. He supposed, strictly speaking, she ought to have a good hiding, or something of that kind, but he was sure that such a course would be a great mistake. If anything was to be done, it would have to be done by kindness. Further, his own position in the matter was one of difficulty. They would look to him, of course, to bring her home at once ; but he could hardly do that, because he had already given his word not to do so. He was obliged to make a promise to the little fool to remain absolutely neutral in the matter, or nothing could have been done with her without resorting to brute force ; and he hoped they did not expect him to do that. He felt himself to be rather in the position of a judge who had to look after the interests of both parties ; of a judge who had to be impartial and see that justice was properly administered, without committing himself to either side.

The tone of his long letter, however, was hard to reconcile with this judicial attitude. It was special pleading, all compact. There seemed no attempt in it, as far as his sister could see, to observe the neutrality of which he made a profession. Finally he said : " Of course, her behaviour has been that of the damnedest little donkey, but you can tell Edmund from me that if he had seen her dead beat on that

heap of stones by the side of the road, and night coming on, a few things might have been brought home to him. Whatever she's done she is about the finest little filly I have seen in my life, and that is saying a lot, because I flatter myself I know a good one when I see one. There are points about the poor little devil that make you wonder. She is asleep now; and although she has been through a great deal, I do not think you need be anxious about her. I let a doctor see her as soon as we got here, and we were careful about her feed and put her to bed with hot-water bottles. Her feet are in a shocking state; the little fool came away in a pair of thin shoes; and I am not sure that the sun has not caught her head a bit. But the doctor says a night's rest will do wonders. I am going to stay with her here until you decide what is to be done. Do not blame me for not bringing her back. P.S.—Mum's the word with the missis."

Mrs. Broke took the first opportunity of discussing this letter with Broke. They had both passed a peculiarly unhappy night, but this communication did not bring them peace of mind. Broke read every line with care and solemnity. When he returned it to her after so doing, his face was the colour of the grey-tinted paper on which it was written.

He did not speak.

"We are dead out of luck," said his wife, looking at him rather nervously. Of late she had learned to hold him in fear.

Broke still did not speak.

"I think Charles has acted very well," she said, with no attempt to conceal the anxiety of her tone. "And for once, Edmund, I do hope you will allow Charles to be a judge. I am perfectly convinced that his attitude is the right one. We have alienated the child, and if we are to win her back again, we can only hope to do so by exhibiting the greatest tact."

"What do you mean?" said Broke in a slow, husky tone.

"Is there a need to explain? It is easy to see from the way in which Charles has worded his letter that the child has refused to return."

He turned his grim eyes on his wife.

“You talk as though you want her to return.”

“Of course—of course,” she said, with a slight air of bewilderment. “Of course, Edmund, we want her to return.”

The limp lines seemed to fall from Broke’s bearing.

“You must set your mind at rest on that point. She will never come back here.”

The deliberately chosen syllables seemed to arrest the blood in her heart.

“I—I don’t understand,” she said, with her hands going up to her face.

The dismal weariness in her voice was a little piteous.

Man and wife confronted one another like a pair of phantoms who afflict each other with their presence. Broke saw the look on her face and heard the tones of her voice. He laid his hand on her shoulder firmly, but with a certain kindness.

“Steady, old girl,” he said.

“It is a little inhuman,” said the mother. There was a chord in her that he heard then for the first time.

Broke waved away the accusation with his hands.

“I must decline to discuss it,” he said. “It does not admit of discussion.”

But it was impossible for Mrs. Broke to deliver up this second child without a struggle, a last convulsive struggle against unreason. The loss of her son had told on her more heavily than anybody could have guessed. She had to the full the feminine desire for guidance in matters of importance, for she was too wise to hold herself in any way above her sex. Her intelligence was too keen to allow her to interpose it unwisely; but she was pre-eminently a woman and a mother. She could not stand by while a second child of her flesh perished before her eyes, without stretching out a hand to snatch it from the abyss.

“Edmund,” said the bowed woman, clutching at a table for support, “you cannot know what you say. It is inhuman to punish an act of childish folly so inexorably. She is but a child. She did not know what she did.”

Broke made an imperious wave of the arm, as though to put her off. His head was aloof, but she could discern dimly that the awful, clenched, ashen look was in him still.

"You cannot do it, Edmund. You shall not do it. Your son was of your own sex, and it was your right to deal with him as you thought proper. But you shall not treat a woman in that manner; you shall not, indeed."

Broke was like a statue.

"I claim the prescriptive right of a mother to deal with my children of my own sex."

"You have no jurisdiction in a matter of this kind," said Broke in a dry voice.

"Then I claim the consideration my sex is accustomed to receive in civilized communities. It is an act of barbarism to apply the same code to women as to men."

"They can be equally guilty."

"The first precept of our civilization should teach us to condone their faults."

"I shall not make phrases with you. It is enough that in any circumstances I decline to condone disloyalty in man or woman of my name."

"You cannot mean it, Edmund. You cannot know what it involves. Whatever is to become of her!"

Buffeted by this brutality, her strength was failing. Her voice was growing high and weak.

"I have thought about that," said Broke; "I am about to write to Charles to place her in her old school at Brighton until she is of age. Until then I will maintain her there, because the law requires it."

"And afterwards?" She spoke with an eagerness that sprang from an intolerable anguish.

"As far as I am concerned personally there is no afterwards."

"You cannot mean that! Surely you will then consent to receive her again. After she has expiated her offence you will take her back."

"There are offences that nothing can expiate, that nothing can condone. Disloyalty is the first of them. And as you

force me to say it, Jane, let me tell you that if it were possible, the sex makes it the more abominable."

"It is the savage speaking again," said the mother drearily.

"I can bear your taunts," said her husband. "Cowards are often as quick with their tongues as they are with their heels."

Mrs. Broke quivered. His dreadful unreason was unnerving her.

"It is possible to drive even a woman too far, Edmund. I must warn you."

"Poor fool!"

His sneer turned her faithful blood into ice.

"I suppose you know," he said, with a brutal absence of vehemence, "that the abettors of the guilty run the danger of being arraigned. Don't trespass too far. A man is not very patient when he finds the very foundations of his house dry-rotted with disloyalty."

The wife of thirty years blushed a vivid colour, and recoiled from the tone with horror taking her by the heart. A full minute of silence passed, in which the woman of wisdom and mastery fought passionately for self-control. After a frantic struggle she recovered it.

"You must please forgive me, Edmund," she said, with an utter humility of voice and manner, "if the words I have used have been other than—than you think they ought to have been. Women have not the hardihood of men if you deal them blows over the heart. Nature makes us cry out a little wildly sometimes."

"I—ah—forgive you."

Broke's magnanimity was generally admired by the critics in the stalls of the Olympian Theatre.

"Will you not consent to receive her again?" said the unhappy woman, immediately relapsing out of the self-control she had with so much difficulty imposed upon herself, now that the voice of her lord sounded human once more.

Broke had no desire to be harsh with one who a long experience had taught him was as faithful a soul as any in the world. He summoned his habitual tenderness for her.

“ My poor old girl,” he said, “ why harrow your feelings in this way ? You remind me of a person who has a horror of death walking into the Morgue to look at it.”

“ Are you wholly without pity, Edmund ? Do you never forgive ? ”

“ We have lived long enough together for you to answer that question for yourself,” said Broke, without resentment. She was a woman and a mother, after all, poor old girl !

“ It begins to seem almost,” said the unhappy woman, “ that I have been yoked all these years with a sort of monster, and I have not known it. The first I could hardly bear ; the second may be too much.”

Broke did not look at his wife’s face. Also he tried not to listen to her words. It was hardly fair to her to listen ; he had a very chivalrous heart. For she spoke no longer as the cool and temperate woman of affairs. In such a speech as this there was nothing to be recognized of the mellow candour, the amiable cynicism, the slightly inhuman wisdom of her who so long had practised the world’s doctrine of expedience. Indeed, had he been in a mood for laughter, such a melodramatic change in her must have caused him to indulge in it.

However, let others laugh at that spectacle. As a woman and a mother something was her due. And as a man and a father something was due to him also. He bled as well as she. It was his fate to be denied a recognition of that fact, but such was the supposed austerity of the male sex, that he must suffer that unfairness. The feminine sense of justice is known to be imperfect. The pangs of maternity may be great, but are there no nerve-centres in the human father ? Had he had no gaping wounds of his own there might have been a better hope for them both. That same guarantee of a lofty disinterestedness was with him here in the case of his daughter as in that of his son. As it was, his own desperate pangs gave him strength. From them he derived the power to sit down there and then and write a letter of instruction to his brother-in-law. It embodied, with cruel completeness, the decree he had issued to his wife. If his right hand offended he struck it off.

He did not show this letter to Delia's mother, and she did not ask to see it. Placing it in the pocket of his coat, he went straight to the stables, procured a horse, rode to the nearest post office, and posted it with his own hands.

As he performed the act, a hearty round of applause was bestowed upon him from all parts of the Olympian Theatre. The house was already unanimous in opinion that this was one of the most gifted natural comedians who had had the honour to tread its boards.

CHAPTER XXXVI

ENTER A MESSENGER FROM THE COURTS OF HYMEN

IF Broke's ideal was loyalty, his instinct at the period he went to wife must have been very sure and remarkable. The writing and posting of the letter taxed that quality to the utmost in Mrs. Broke. It was a chief glory of her character, an instance of the divine patience of her sex, that, broken and shattered as she already was by the incident of her son, she did not in the end allow this second evidence of her husband's real nature to wrench them asunder.

It was a rather heroic devotion. From whatever standpoint a woman may take her outlook on life, she cannot suffer the children of her heart to be cast away without nursing a bitter resentment against the instrument of her woe, even if it happen to be Almighty God. It would have been fatally easy for a smaller nature, with its weakened resources, to break away from Broke, and for its own solace repudiate those drastic acts of which as husband and father he had shown himself to be capable. Her instincts cried out to her to denounce and put off the inhuman monster who had trampled her maternity under his feet ; her force of will kept her staunch. The qualities that had enabled her to keep the sinking ship so long afloat came now to her aid in this, the most instant crisis of her life. That indomitable resolution, thrice welded in the furnace of necessity, rendered her strong, when every nerve cried out that loyalty could no longer be expected, no longer demanded of her.

In abiding passively by this second decree Mrs. Broke saw,

as in the case of the first, just one remote gleam of hope. That favourite doctrine, *laissez-faire*, must be invoked, in the hope that as time went on things might follow a less inexorable trend. If Delia re-entered her old school for a year, or perhaps two, and atoned for her misconduct by a subsequent exemplary behaviour that had formerly been hers, there was still a hope, however faint, that time, the healer of all wounds, might also soften the nature of her father's implacable resentment. It was not yet the hour to despair of ever getting her back into the fold. Her knowledge of Broke told her how far off this hope was; but at least the ukase against her youngest daughter could not be quite as irrevocable as that against their only son. Delia had rebelled, it was true, but as yet she could not be said to have done anything that put her for ever outside the pale.

During the long week of blood and tears that followed the sending of the letter, the unhappy woman was in the throes of conflict. Morning, afternoon, and evening, and in the long watches of the night, it was a perpetual struggle of tooth and nail. During that period she saw at least two letters lying unopened in the handwriting of her brother addressed to her husband. Broke did not show them to her, nor subsequently did he allude to their contents. Valiantly she strove to defeat all conjectures concerning them, and by sheer force of will nearly succeeded in so doing.

It was not until nearly a fortnight had passed that the matter entered a new phase. Her brother came unexpectedly one afternoon. She noted at once that his manner was rather more hangdog and querulous than usual. Something appeared to be weighing on his mind. He had the air of one who, having been commissioned to break bad news, is so oppressed with the sense of his responsibility that he adopts a demeanour calculated to raise extravagant fears.

Presently, after recourse to two whiskies and sodas, much shifting of the cigar in his mouth, much fidgeting and irresolution, Lord Bosket proposed that they should go to another room, as he had something important to tell his sister.

Mrs. Broke took him to her sitting-room.

"I'm glad Edmund is not about," said her brother, with the air of a criminal. "I'm not quite sure how he'll take it, do you see. I think it will be better for you to break it to him, Jane. You understand his ways more and know him better than I do."

"What has happened?" said Mrs. Broke, already oppressed by this circumlocution.

"The little filly was married this mornin'."

Mrs. Broke shuddered a little and laughed a little in the same instant of time.

"I am afraid, Charles, I don't understand."

"She was married this mornin' by special licence to that writin' feller; and I've just seen 'em off to Paris for the honeymoon. From Paris they are goin' to the Mediterranean, and then on to Algiers."

The weary bewilderment in the face of Mrs. Broke increased rather than grew less.

"The world moves a little too fast for one just now. One is out of breath trying to keep pace with it. I—I confess I don't quite know where I am."

"Of course, you will say it is all my fault," said Lord Bosket gloomily. "But I couldn't hold that little filly. She took her head right away from the start. Twice I wrote to Edmund after that pretty letter he sent me to tell him there was not much chance of my bein' able to carry out his instructions, but he didn't trouble to reply. Besides, I don't mind tellin' you, Jane, that I didn't mean to carry 'em out. I thought that letter was the rottenest ever written. I had not the heart to show it to the poor little gal."

Mrs. Broke looked at her brother with a faint tinge of horror in her face.

"Did you see that letter, Jane?"

"No, Charles, I did not; but I was aware of the contents."

"Oh, you were! Well, my gal, I don't think I should be proud of it if I were you. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, both of you."

Lord Bosket concluded his remarks with a sudden heat.

"I don't mind tellin' you, Jane," he added, "that that letter got me on the raw. I wonder if I would have written a letter like that if I had had nice little fillies of my own."

"Don't, Charles, please," said the unhappy woman, with bowed head. "There was great provocation."

"Provocation be damned. Tell her to come back, and promise her a good hidin' when she does come; or fetch her yourself, and see that she gets one; but there is no need to tell the poor little gal she is no longer your daughter. But mind you, Jane, I don't hold *you* responsible. I'll lay a thousand to five that that was Edmund. I've always said that Edmund can be an awful swine when he likes."

"We werè very much upset, Charles, when that letter was written," said his sister weakly. She endeavoured, for her husband's credit, to associate herself with the offending document. She did not succeed.

"Upset!" said Lord Bosket contemptuously. "Upset! But don't tell me that you had a hand in it. You could not ha' written that letter any more than I could myself. That was Edmund, the ugly brute. I expect he'll be a tearin' lunatic when he hears about this mornin's performance. But mind you, Jane, I believe it is for the best. The thing was done accordin' to Cocker, mind you. I gave the little filly away myself, and saw 'em off from Charing Cross afterwards. And they are not goin' to starve. I saw that young feller once or twice in the paddock before the event, and everything was settled accordin' to the card."

"Am I to take it, Charles, that you helped them to get married?" said his sister in a bewildered tone.

"You can take it, my gal, just as you please. I suppose there will be another 'Scene in the House' now it's done, but if I was to say I was sorry I should not be speakin' the truth. I looked at the matter all ways on, and finally came to the conclusion that the best thing I could do was to give 'em a leg up. Edmund would not have the poor little gal back, and in all my born days I have not seen a pair cut out prettier for double harness. Nice pair—very. And if I know anything those two young devils were not goin' to

stand nonsense from anybody. Once they were together I don't see what was goin' to hold 'em."

"There was the law."

"So there was. Funny I didn't think of that. But it makes no odds. You and Edmund and me and all the judges on the Bench would not ha' held 'em at the finish. They were a pair of customers, those two. From the time I first saw our little tit on that heap of stones, it was a moral that once she had started there would be no gettin' her back to the post. She would ha' died first. I have seen some rum ones in my time, Jane, but never one to touch her. And for that matter I might as well tell you that Edmund could ha' saved himself the trouble of writin' that letter. It was a thousand to five that his little gal would never trouble him again. I thought at first, don't you know, that she was so obstinate because she was done up; but the next mornin', when she had put in a sound night's rest and she got up in her right mind, do you know what she said? I suppose I had better not tell you."

"I should prefer to know, Charles."

"Well, says our little Miss Broke, 'God may forgive him, but I never will!'—meanin' her father. It was said in cold blood, mind you. Pretty good, that, for a bit of a thing not out of her teens, and not much bigger than a brown mouse. She was as quiet and soft about it as you please; no tears, no fuss. Somehow, Jane, that got home on me. There's a bit of Edmund himself in her."

A wan look had come into the face of Mrs. Broke. There was no need for her brother to draw that analogy; the wife and mother had already drawn it for herself.

"Queen Elizabeth," she said, trying a laugh.

The attempt, however, was rather ghastly, and merely served to emphasize the look of horror in her eyes.

"I suppose, Charles, we ought to be very grateful for all you have done for this wretched child," said his sister, striving to put on her armour of suave, practical matter-of-fact. It was a difficult process, but the valiant woman got it on somehow. "I am sure, Charles, you have acted for the best. If you had not gone after her so promptly I

shudder to think what might have happened to a penniless and distraught creature like that, alone in London."

"I can tell you," said her brother, with grim brevity. "There would ha' been the body of a little gal to identify—found dead on a doorstep in the Charing Cross Road at one in the mornin'."

"I must ask you to spare my feelings, Charles," said his sister, shuddering at this realism.

"You didn't spare that poor little gal's, none of you," said Lord Bosket, with gloomy indignation.

"I should have come to relieve you of the charge of the child immediately, had not Edmund proved so unreasonable. And had I come I am afraid I could have done no good. But tell me, Charles, this man Porter, what opinion did you form of him?"

"I have already given you my opinion, my gal."

"Do you not think you might be a little more explicit in—in the light of what has happened?"

"Well, I went to see him at the office of his newspaper. I dare say you will be interested to know that he had still got a mark on his forehead the size of half a crown, but that he had had his front teeth put in again. And it didn't take long for me to grant him a licence. A very straightforward, honest, unassuming young feller, ready to run straight. He didn't allude to that little occurrence, naturally; but somehow he had not the air of a man who carries a grievance, and as soon as I saw that I gave him full marks. Give me the feller who can take a hidin' whether he's deserved it or not."

Mrs. Broke winced a little.

"And it struck me, Jane, that he had got a mind of his own, had that young feller. He said he should stand by her whatever happened now that she had come to him. He said he had no wish to put himself on the wrong side of the law, but law or no law he was goin' to marry her. I must say I liked the style of the feller altogether. Nothin' fussy, nothin' highfalutin, but straight and plain as daylight. He gave me the feelin' that things were pannin' out better than we could have hoped."

“ Did he strike you as a gentleman, Charles ? ”

“ Wish I was as good a one,” said my lord gloomily.

“ I mean, Charles, in a conventional sense.”

“ He’s not one of the haw-haw brigade, if that’s what you mean. And I’ve seen hosses cut prettier in the jib. But he’s one to be reckoned with in any company. I don’t remember to have met one so *thorough*. I’d ha’ trusted him with one of my own. And, mind you, I went to him right up to the muzzle in prejudice.”

“ I suppose you know he is the son of a Cuttisham bookseller ? ”

“ Very creditable to the booksellers of Cuttisham, if that is so. If they can produce that sort they are a fine body o’ men.”

“ But, my dear Charles——”

“ There’s no ‘ buts ’ about it. Let every tub stand on its own bottom. When you meet a damn fool, give him the order of the boot ; when you meet a wise man you can politely raise your hat. And I’ll lay a monkey to nothing you’ll want a new piece to your toe before you’ve worn out the brim of your beaver. If I felt myself to be the equal of that young feller I should carry my head a bit higher than I do at present, I don’t mind tellin’ you.”

“ One is a little astonished by the idealist picture you paint of him.”

“ No need to be, my gal. I’ve seen him not once or twice, mind you, but a dozen times. I ought to be a bit of a judge of a horse, but I never ran over the points of one that had got to carry my racin’ colours as I did his. You don’t think, Jane, do you, that I should ha’ handed our little gal to a feller that I wouldn’t back to my last ‘ lord o’ the manor ’ ? ”

“ I do not, Charles. I do you that justice.”

“ Very good of you, I’m sure. And, in my opinion, they will be about the best mated pair in England. They are made for one another, you might say, like a cup and saucer. That little filly of ours wants a man of that sort or none. A common feller, with no mind and no character, would not do for her.”

“ And he can afford to keep her, Charles ? ”

“ He has eight hundred a year of his own, I understand, and I hear he is ^{is} a risin' man. His chief tells me he is goin' far. In the meantime I have settled another two hundred a year on the little filly myself, just to keep 'em from starving. I knew Edmund couldn't, and if he could he wouldn't.”

Mrs. Broke was touched by this concrete example of her brother's goodness of heart.

“ I don't know how we can thank you, Charles, for all you have done,” she said humbly. “ You have always been the truest friend we have had. There seems no end to your kindnesses.”

“ That's all right,” said her brother, with a slight display of uneasiness, “ no need to go into trifles. It is no more than anybody else would ha' done in the circumstances. They might ha' stopped short of the ceremony, I dare say they would ; but let people say what they like, I am convinced it will turn out sound.”

Lord Bosket rose to go. As he was leaving the house he met Broke, who was coming across the hall. Their usual informal greetings were exchanged. It then struck Lord Bosket with surprise that his brother-in-law refrained from alluding to the subject which had dominated his own thoughts for a fortnight past. So great was his relief at thus providentially finding himself in a position to avoid this topic, that, on his own part, he studiously refrained from making a reference to it. All the same, it was very strange that Edmund should not speak of it in any way. However, as Lord Bosket proceeded to pass out at the door, he turned back to say over his shoulder :

“ By the way, Edmund, you had better go and have a word with Jane. She's got something to tell you.”

Delia's cunning uncle then disappeared through the door hastily, lest her father should recall him to explain what the something was.

Broke did not go to his wife at once. He had no doubt the matter could wait until he had laid his mind at rest on a point in regard to turnips which he wanted to look

up in a back number of the *Field*. Having convinced himself after researches lasting nearly an hour that the *Field* said just what he thought it did say, he went to talk with his wife.

He was rather surprised by the amount of emotion that was reflected in her face. It would have been hard to find an obtuser person than he, but the change that had been taking place in her recently could not escape even his unobserving eyes.

"Charles said you wished to speak to me."

"I wanted to tell you that Delia married that man this morning."

The announcement was made without any sort of preface. It was received with blank indifference.

Mrs. Broke could hardly conceal her surprise. She had looked for a repetition, in some sort at least, of the scene that followed a similar announcement in the case of Billy. But Broke paid no more heed than if he had not heard a word. Her immediate feeling was one of relief, although even as she experienced it there was a sense that his attitude was a little uncanny.

"I hope, Edmund," she said nervously, "that you view the matter in the light I do myself. I believe it to be rather providential. The child has made a hopeless mess of her life, but I am by no means sure that things have not turned out as well as could have been expected. Charles quite thinks so. Indeed, he has helped rather actively to bring it about. The man has earned his entire confidence, and, I think, Edmund, we must allow, that Charles, with all his foibles, is a shrewd judge of character. Charles has behaved most generously. He has settled two hundred a year on the child herself and the man, I understand, has eight hundred a year of his own and excellent prospects."

But deliberately Broke was not hearing a word. He suppressed a yawn with his hand. Mrs. Broke's sense of relief having passed, she was now afflicted severely by such an attitude. She would almost have preferred a scene.

"I hope you realize, Edmund, how vital all this is to the welfare of the child?"

“ On the contrary, the—ah—matter does not interest me. It was closed a fortnight ago, and in any circumstances it cannot be reopened.”

“ But, Edmund——”

He cut her short with his hand.

“ I shall be glad, Jane, when you bring yourself to realize that this is the case. It is a waste of time to attempt to reopen a subject that is closed once and for all.”

“ But, Edmund——! ”

“ Is this all you wish to speak to me about ? ”

“ It is,” said his wife. She was cut to the heart.

Broke left the room in the leisurely manner in which he had entered it.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE LADY BOSKET AT HOME

ON leaving his sister, Lord Bosket went to his own home, some five miles from Covenden. He had been absent a fortnight; and on leaving London that morning he had gone direct to the distressed family of Covenden. The man and the clothes he had telegraphed for after his unpremeditated visit to town had been sent on in advance. As soon as he arrived at Hipsley that afternoon the butler greeted him.

“ Her ladyship told me to say, my lord, that she wished to see you particularly the moment you returned. She is in her study, my lord.”

In the impassive person who made this announcement, Lord Bosket's grunt did not cause an inch of eyebrow to be displaced. Nor did the long-drawn whistle produce a visible emotion in that implicit breast.

“ How's her plumage, Paling ? ”

“ Standing up, my lord.”

“ You had better get me a whisky and soda, then, before I go and face the music.”

Reinforced by this elixir, Lord Bosket betook himself presently to the study of his gifted wife. She was discovered seated at an Empire writing-table, writing copiously on blue foolscap with a feathered quill. At a side table, a sort of annexe to the Mount Parnassus where sat the child of the gods, the daughter of the Muses, was seated a second lady, severe of years, of aspect also, the secretary of the distinguished authoress. At the moment she was fingering a typewriter, assiduously clucking out into a fair copy the

pellucid lines of *Love Eclectic; a Sonnet Cycle*, immediately antecedent to its being given to the peoples of the earth in nine monthly magazines, and countless baser newspapers; afterwards to be born again, like a second Peleus, in the buckram and large paper of the higher grove of the birds of song.

The utterer of these winged words, whose destiny it was to cleave the air of our time with fragrance, having concluded this important contribution to the heritage of man, was now engaged upon a short essay, yclept *An Inquiry into the Decay of Feeling*. Its avowed purpose was to keep a light burning in these dark days of Brutality and Mammon. The ideal it set before itself was to mingle the culture of Old Greece with the humane simplicity of the New Testament. The syndicate which had purchased the serial rights before a line had been written had already paid a substantial cheque on account.

Beside the elbow of the [gifted lady was a feminine periodical written exclusively by Peeresses for the perusal of Ladies who had been presented at Court, and Gentlewomen of the Upper Middle Class. On the cover was the picture of a Crowned Head in Colours. The Crown had been reproduced with a fidelity never attempted before. By a triumph of lithography every stone in it received its value, and shone with the greatest authenticity. A copy of the magazine had been graciously accepted by the Crowned Head in question. And so lavish were its proprietors in the lures with which they ravished the eyes of the public, that, as if this fact was not in itself enough to exhaust the first edition on the day of publication, there was displayed on the top of the cover, in a type sufficiently bold to cause the hesitating purchaser at once to resolve her doubts, the legend "The Lady Bosket at Home, by One who Knows Her, page 340."

A reference to the page in question set forth, under the general title of "Illustrated Interview No. 12," many details of the home life of the author of *Poses in the Opaque*. Not only was she the first poetess and authoress of her time from the point of view of an unimpeachable distinction, but it was

also her privilege to sit in the gallery of the Upper House. To be sure there had been others, but incredible as it might appear, even wearers of the strawberry leaf were not endowed so unmistakably with the authentic thrill as Lady Bosket. The husband of the gifted lady, said the enthusiastic periodical, was also a gentleman of exemplary life and great culture, widely known and deeply respected, a generous patron of the Turf, a member of the Jockey Club, and a popular and accomplished Master of Hounds.

It appeared that in the singularly beautiful home life of this great and good lady her humility was in a nice proportion to her gifts. Her tastes were as simple as they were refined. She had a predilection for blue china, and black letter, white muslin, and green tea. It was a popular fallacy to suppose that that exquisite utterance, "Home is the woman's sphere," was out of the *Poses*, in the same way that it was to suppose that "God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb" was out of the Bible; but it belonged to her in a higher and more special sense, because of the serene and unflinching manner in which she sustained the domestic character. She had made it her own. It was the very well-spring of her writings. It was the sacred fount, whence gushed the pure solace of many a humble hearth.

As befitted the transcendent genius of one "who had become a classic in her own lifetime"—in the words of one of the journals whose privilege it was to extol her works—the definitive edition of the collected writings of Lady Bosket, the Hipsley edition of the publishers' announcements, stood on the side table in twelve majestic tomes. On the virgin front of each was stamped a monogram and crest. Within was a full-length photogravure of the gifted lady, in a coronet and ermine. Each volume was further equipped with an introduction from the pen of a purveyor of prefaces to the classic authors.

Lady Bosket had exchanged the lorgnette of public life for the gold eye-glasses of the study. Upon the appearance of her lord she resolutely rounded the period on which she was engaged, and then turned majestically in her chair to confront him.

"Be so good as to leave us, Miss Mottrom," she said in her most imperious key.

The thirteenth daughter of a rural dean who had been manipulating the typewriter carried the machine and *Love Eclectic: a Sonnet Cycle* into another room. When Lord Bosket had closed the door, Lady Bosket glared upon him stonily through her eye-glasses. Less accustomed to their use on active service, she then discarded them in favour of the more familiar weapon.

"So you have condescended to come!"

"Oh, yes." Her spouse affected a meek but somewhat uneasy lightness of tone.

"Have you any objection to telling me where you have been during the past fortnight?"

"Town."

"That is a lie, Charles."

The delicately cut nostril quivered. The whir of intellectual feathers could be faintly heard.

"Beg pardon," said Lord Bosket humbly.

The uncompromising statement was repeated.

"I knew you'd say that," he said, more humbly than ever. "But it's God's truth."

"I say it is a falsehood. You have not slept once at Grosvenor Street during the last fortnight."

"No, I have been stayin' at an hotel."

"You have the effrontery to tell me that to my face! What do you mean by staying at an hotel when there is your own house to go to? There is only one construction to be placed upon such an act; and, Charles, knowing you as I do, I do not hesitate to place it upon it."

Before such splendid scorn her lord was dumb. The silvered hair shook about the intellectual temples. The high voice rose higher, to a wail "like the zephyrs of March among the groves of the forest" (*Love Eclectic*, XIX).

"Wholly debased and abandoned as you are," said Lady Bosket, stimulated to superior flights by the meekness of this wretched groveller, "such a behaviour can have no bearing upon your reputation or your character. But with me, I think Heaven this is not the case. I must be watchful,

Charles, that my name shall not be tarnished by the breath of suspicion. Do you suppose that the work to which I have dedicated my life : the leavening of the lives of others—do you suppose, Charles, that such an aim as this is to be rendered nugatory by the irresponsible acts of the coarse ruffian who bears my name ? ”

Lord Bosket, with his hands in his pockets, whistled softly to himself throughout the whole of this oration.

“ You are wrong for once,” he said dismally, when the gifted lady had rounded her last period.

The cringing posture of this worm among mankind imbued the poetess with a more heroic fury.

“ Well, Charles, it may interest you to know that when you were last from home, you were traced by a private detective to the house of an actress in St. John’s Wood.”

“ I only went to take her a bunch of roses, and drink a cup of tea. No harm in that.”

“ Man, do not have the effrontery to defend yourself. Your very existence is an offence. The only excuse one has had for tolerating it so long has been the slender hope that force of example would bring about your reform. But I lose heart, Charles. A very little more, and cost what it may to wash dirty linen in public, I shall obtain peace of mind at the price of self-respect and proceed to do so.”

“ How much more ? ” The eagerness of the inquiry was a little pathetic.

“ Pray do not flatter yourself unduly.” The tender, pious hope was nipped in the bud already. “ I do not propose as yet to abandon you to the mire. But this, however, is not the matter I wish to discuss. Charles, I must ask you to be good enough to read this. Had I not been so busy with my work I should have felt it to be my duty to see Jane and Edmund personally.”

As she spoke Lady Bosket picked up *The Times* newspaper, reclining cheek-by-jowl with the Hipsley edition of her works. She indicated an announcement of marriage on the front page for Lord Bosket’s perusal. He read : “ Porter—Broke. On the 16th inst., at St. Remigius’, South Kensington, by the Rev. Canon J. G. Pryse-Johnson,

M.A., Vicar, Alfred, eldest son of Joseph Porter, Cuttisham, Parks, to Delia Mary, youngest daughter of E. W. A. C. B. Broke, Esq., J.P., D.L., 3 Broke Street, St. James's, S.W.; and Covenden, Cuttisham, Parks."

Lady Bosket watched grimly the face of her husband while he read this literary achievement with something of the emotion of an author who for the first time sees his work in the fierce glamour of print.

"It is impossible," she said; "it cannot be true, and yet it is alarmingly circumstantial. And *The Times* is so correct as a rule. If any one has put a vulgar hoax upon it I hope it will bring the perpetrator to justice."

"It don't look so bad in print after all," said the author. "The Vicar and I fixed up that little account ourselves, and it will be in all the London papers this mornin'. The Vicar wanted to put in niece of you and me, but I said no. It would not be fair to the little gal to have her handicapped like that. But still that little account don't look so bad. And I see they have spelt the 'Pryse' right. The Vicar was afraid they might spell it 'P-r-i-c-e.'"

At this point the joint author was stayed imperiously by the high priestess of his craft.

"Stop, Charles! What talk is this! Really, I am afraid you are not sober."

"Sober as a judge," said Lord Bosket earnestly. "I know what I'm sayin'. I thought it best to do the thing accordin' to Cocker, or not at all. Now honour bright, missis, as a judge of literature, don't you think that that little account looks very well in print?"

"If you are not drunk, Charles, you must be mad. Will you have the goodness to explain your meaning?"

Lord Bosket was not permitted to proceed very far in his remarkable but not particularly lucid statement, before he was stopped again.

"Will you have the goodness to employ as little licence in your speech as possible? As I have so often had occasion to remind you, the word 'filly' is intended to signify a young female horse, not a young female human being."

Lord Bosket continued as best he could under this hamper-

ing restriction. Long before the end of his narrative Lady Bosket was far too bewildered to be able to impose any further checks upon it.

"It is too much," she cried. "One's reason staggers! What was everybody about? What were her parents about? And you, Charles? And the child herself? And the police, what were they doing? The man must be mad. You all must be mad! No; I will not, I cannot believe it."

Lady Bosket ended on a sob of angry pain, which gave her so much pleasure that it might have been real. Lord Bosket, one of the tenderest-hearted men in the world—at least those who knew him best were firm in that belief—was touched by such a poignant distress. He had the intrepidity to seek to lessen it.

"No need to take on about it, missis. It's all for the best, I'm certain. Edmund said he wouldn't have her back; and she said she wouldn't go back, and meant it, too. Fact is, she might ha' gone much farther and fared much worse. Lucky little filly to get a feller like that; though, mind you, he's lucky too. She's a fine little gal."

"Charles, have you the effrontery to stand there and defend your conduct?"

"I'm not ashamed of it," said Lord Bosket in his meek voice. "I am damned if I am. If the same thing happened to-morrow I'd do it again."

"Can you be aware that this man is from behind the counter of a bookseller's shop in Cuttisham?"

"Devilish lucky counter to keep a man like that behind it, as I said to Jane." For the first time in this interview Lord Bosket showed a spark of spirit. Attacks on his personal character he had formed the habit of accepting as a matter of course, they were in accordance with his merit; but in the cause of others he could be valiant. "Missis, what I say is this, if they have got any more of that sort hidin' behind the counters in the Cuttisham shops the sooner they come from behind them the better for the nation. I'd back that young chap to any amount. If I'd got a little filly of my own, I'd be proud for that young feller to marry her."

"Man, you forget yourself."

"Wish I could," said the man drearily.

"You not only countenance this immoral marriage, you defend it. Have you no sense of decency? Have you no fragment of self-respect? Answer me, man. Were you drunk when you did it?"

"No," said the man quietly.

"I suppose there is a law in the land by which this immoral marriage can be set aside. What are Jane and Edmund doing? Have they communicated with the police?"

"No; but they damn near had to. If I hadn't happened to meet old Pearce that afternoon, they'd ha' been wanted at the mortuary to identify the body of a little gal."

"What is Edmund doing?"

"If you had read the letter he wrote to me when she went away, you wouldn't inquire. He disowned her at the start. He behaved like the swine that he can be, did Edmund, I don't mind tellin' you."

"A very right and proper course for Edmund to take."

Lord Bosket gave his shoulders a whimsical shrug.

"The man Porter must be lost to all sense of shame. As for that child, she is so abandoned that one hardly cares to put into words one's feeling about her. It is intolerable that a mere child should involve her family and herself in such degradation."

At this point Lord Bosket found the temerity to shake his head in dissent.

"Here, steady on, missis," he interjected suddenly.

In an instant was he turned upon and rent.

"You deny me the right to express my opinion, Charles," cried the gifted lady, "like the wind in the gables groaning" (*Love Eclectic*, XXXV). "But I will express it. Do you suppose I will be brow-beaten by a coarse bully? The child is my niece—would that she were not—and whatever I choose to think of her I will say. One might have known that the moment she fell into your clutches she would be ruined."

"Steady on," said Lord Bosket.

An odd look had come in his face suddenly.

“Do you ask me, Charles, to condone such shameless and abandoned conduct?”

“Steady on, missis,” said her lord. “Stick to me; my back’s broad; and I dare say I deserve all I get. But leave that little gal alone, do you hear. Nobody’s goin’ to say a word against that little filly before me.”

“Oh, indeed, Charles. I shall say exactly what I choose of the little filly, as you term her so elegantly.” The sagacious lady saw where the shoe pinched. She wanted to inflict pain; and in the pleasure of the discovery of the vulnerable heel of this besotted Achilles, against whom her shafts were directed in vain as a rule, she was inclined to exult.

In the meantime the uneasiness of Lord Bosket’s manner had become more visible. His dogged, querulous look was giving way to something else; his face approximated a shade nearer to the colour of the tomato, if such a feat in æstheticism was possible. Something almost sinister was showing in his furtive and uneasy eye. He began to waddle up and down the carpet, a course to which the keenest of his lady’s barbs had failed to incite him hitherto. Nor was Lady Bosket slow to observe this salutary effect upon her sot of a husband. It induced her to spread her pinions wider. She went to higher flights.

Suddenly Lord Bosket stopped in his eccentric waddle, and bent his head towards her with a humble, perplexed expression.

“What was that you said, missis? I didn’t quite catch it.”

The phrase was repeated, syllable by syllable, with blistering unction.

There was a pause while Lord Bosket strove to instil its meaning into his torpid wits. He then appeared to make a great effort to pull himself together. Exhibiting many tokens of mental conflict, he made a careful choice of his words, and proceeded to utter them with a precision that few would have given him the credit of being able to use.

"Look here, my good woman," he said, and his face and fingers began to twitch violently. "Neither you nor anybody else is going to speak of that little gal like that before me. I am not goin' to stand it, d'you see."

"So you choose to be impertinent, Charles," said the intrepid lady, not scenting the danger that she ran. "This is a new development. You coarse bully and ruffian, I shall speak of her in what terms I choose."

"Oh, you will!" said my lord in a gloomy and pensive manner. "Now, missis, look you here, if you ain't civil I shall have to smack you."

The gifted lady paused to gasp for breath. And well she might. Such a speech had frozen the blood in those patrician veins. The degraded thing she called husband was here in a new rôle indeed. Never before had she seen him look thus. And as for hearing him speak in that way, never, never had those chaste ears been so defiled. The man must be drinking himself mad. The flaccid, meek thing, whose name she had borne all these years, on whose devoted head she had been able to wreak her wrath to her heart's content, because of the immunity conferred by his sheeplike nature, had, for the first time, given place to the more hideous guise in which her romantic fancy had delighted to clothe him for the sake of a histrionic effect.

Often enough she had called him a wolf when in her heart she had known him to be only a lamb. Had there seemed even a remote chance of being torn by such a terrible animal, nothing would have induced her to run the risk. No sooner was it borne in upon the gifted lady that the brute meant what he said than her flag went down.

It was only for an instant, however, in the first shock of disillusion. Habit is as powerful as nature. So long had she been accustomed to wield the rod of an unquestioned ascendancy over him, that to acquiesce at once in this new order of things was impossible. The wretch might bluster; but it was not reasonable to suppose that after all these years he could show himself as anything more fierce than she so well knew him to be. This was certainly no wolf, however he might bark and growl and masquerade in grey

fur. She would soon tear away that inane disguise and expose the childish deception. It was only Charles.

With the accession of this second and more comfortable thought, the gifted lady raised her glasses slowly and majestically and went with a splendid deliberation to a doom that was invested in a kind of sublime pathos by the victim's total unconsciousness that she was about to embrace it.

"Charles, I regret to find that you are under the influence of drink. But you are not to suppose that your *Hooliganism* will divorce me from a sense of my duty. Every word I have used in regard to that abandoned child I am prepared to reaffirm. She is as great a disgrace to her sex as you are to yours."

"Very good," said Lord Bosket quietly. "Now you get a damned good hidin'."

Before the astounded lady could realize what was taking place, the sheep in the wolf-skin had made a grab at the Empire writing-table, had seized the manuscript copy of the "Inquiry into the Decay of Feeling," had torn it in a hundred pieces and flung them all over the carpet. His next act was to turn to the side table, and at one fell swoop to knock off the entire Hipsley Edition of the works of Lady Bosket. For quite a minute he played football with these chaste volumes; and a room that was overburdened with objects of art suffered sadly in consequence. The volume containing the imperishable *Poses* themselves he kicked through a gorgeous mirror in the centre of the chimneypiece, which fell from its elevation and was dashed into fragments on the tiles of the hearth. Pieces of old china, Sèvres vases, and choice cameos came to destruction on those relentless tiles. An old cabinet, beautiful and rare, that stood in a corner, then received his attention. He overturned it completely, and in the process innumerable souvenirs from admirers in all parts of the world were scattered about the room. Not here, however, did the *débâcle* end. The sheep in the wolf-skin was further inflamed by the sight of a full-length portrait in oils by a Royal Academician of the author of the *Poses* in her coronet, which hung on the wall in a

massive gilt frame. This admired work was plucked from its place of honour and hurled with a reverberating crash through the middle of a stained-glass window into the conservatory behind.

The sheep in the wolf-skin then turned his attention to his gifted spouse. He found her cowering in a corner of the room, trembling with terror. So little had nature fitted her to cope with crises of this kind that at this moment she could neither think, act, nor utter protest. Her glasses had fallen to the ground and had been trampled to pieces under the feet of the monster.

"Now, then, missis," said her lord, still in the gloomy and pensive manner in which he had wrecked the furniture. "Come out o' that."

He took the gifted lady by the hair and proceeded to drag her out of her refuge. In the act a portion of it, in the form of a toupee, came away in his hand. He then administered a slap with the open palm on one side of the head, and then one on the other side, not very hard, but rather in the pensive and disinterested manner he would have bestowed a similar correction on a puppy that had been guilty of a trifling misdemeanour.

"Damn it, missis, you deserve a lot more than that," he said thoughtfully, after this discipline had been administered. Nevertheless, the first of these rather formal and perfunctory strokes shook the gifted lady to the centre of her being; at the second she sank to her knees among the débris and proceeded to swoon in abject terror at the feet of her lord.

By the time the horrified clergyman's daughter had summoned enough courage to invade the riot, it was an extraordinary scene that rewarded her hardihood. The temple of the Muses had suffered earthquake and eclipse; but that was not the most memorable part of the spectacle which confronted her. The husband of "the most distinguished woman of our time" was seen to be supporting his fainting lady on his knee. He was fondling her hands and addressing terms of endearment to her, while she, poor soul, lay in his arms panting and sobbing, and clinging to them with a face dissolved in tears.

“Dry your eyes, poor old thing,” her lord was saying in tender accents. “Be a good old thing in the future, and it shan’t happen again. You are not hurt, you know; I hardly touched you. If you had had your rights you would ha’ got a lot more than that. But a kiss now, and we will call the account square. Dry your eyes, poor old thing. Miss Mottrom, ring the bell, and we will get the poor old gal a cup of tea. She’s a bit upset.”

“N-n-no,” moaned the tearful lady, “d-do not ring, Miss Mottrom. I—I am not fit to be seen in this state. N-nobody must know. I—I shall be recovered presently.”

The tearful lady must be left to recover by degrees in the tenderly solicitous arms of her lord, who in the meantime is bathing her temples diligently in eau-de-Cologne.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

IN WHICH MR. BREFFIT THE YOUNGER PUTS A HYPHEN TO HIS NAME

IT was in the middle of August that it was arranged that Harriet was to be given in marriage to John Henry Clapham Raynes, tenth Duke of Wimbledon. Broke's opposition was instinctive rather than reasoned, tacit rather than expressed. Still, there were points where expedience merged itself into duty. The match could never have the sanction of his heart, but in the present state of his affairs it might contribute substantially to the well-being of his family. And it was the first doctrine he held, the one to which he clung with a tenacity that made it sacred, the one to which the long line of his name had clung before him, that each individual member of the august institution to which they had the honour to belong must sink their personal desires in the common weal.

In a sense this proposed marriage also sadly went against the conscience of Mrs. Broke. But necessity did much to soften her scruples. The child would be settled in life in a sufficiently handsome manner; and certainly that was a consideration that must be allowed to stand foremost. They were all going to beggary together. It would be little less than a crime to throw away a chance of keeping a roof over their heads. In the matter of young Breffit this austere practical wisdom made her almost equally insistent. In that case, however, Broke's prejudices were not to be overborne. Even expedience itself was powerless before them.

The duke was given *carte blanche*. He had only five to

choose from, it was true, now that Delia was no longer included in the fold. But the noble suitor evinced no bias in favour of any particular one. There was so little difference between them. It savoured of an act of supererogation invidiously to select. One and all were equally healthy, equally homely. Was it not almost too much to ask that among such abundance he should make up his mind and choose for himself? In the end, finding the task of selection to be beyond his powers, he invoked the aid of the president of their destinies.

"My dear friend," he said huskily, "which would you recommend? They all appear so worthy, but I cannot take five, can I?"

"Not in civilized England, my dear Harry. Have you not, may I ask, a slight predilection in favour of any particular one?"

"No, alas!"

"Surely one among them is able to impose her personality upon you in some slight peculiar way."

"No, indeed."

"How extravagantly unimpressionable, my poor dear boy! Cannot you concede something to the feelings of a mother?"

"They are all so much alike," he said plaintively.

"Can you not distinguish between their hair, or their eyes, or their height, my dear Harry? Surely the contour of one among so many must have established a slight sense of precedence in your mind. Shut your eyes, my dear boy, and try to summon one."

"If I shut my eyes they do not come at all. I implore you to make a suggestion. The first name you give I will accept."

Mrs. Broke laughed smoothly.

"But surely, surely, the suggestion should come from you. We women, you know, are so sentimental in these matters. We are ever seeking to pluck the dragon's tooth of sentiment out of our garden, but it seems hopeless to destroy the crop of superstitions that has been borne upon it. Sex is a strange thing; ours, my dear Harry, even at this time of

day will insist upon investing the institution of matrimony with a certain amount of romance. You are acquainted with their names. Observe the proprieties by uttering one yourself, as haphazard as you please, and she is yours."

It was the duke's turn to laugh now ; this he did with a wheeziness that robbed the act of its spontaneity. But the baffling nature of the matter was expressed by a mild light of humour in his face. Still, there was also his grand hereditary anxiety to observe the proprieties.

"One wants to do the right thing, you know ; one must always do the right thing, mustn't one ? I would wish to avoid the conviction that the selection is arbitrary. Surely, my dear friend, as their mother, you can establish a claim for one of them, by suggesting some little point of priority."

"In the matter of good looks, my dear Harry, I do not think there is a pin to choose between them. They are all equally distinguished by their absence. If we were at the trouble to survey the area of their noses I am sure they would all be found to be of equal dimension. In the colour of their eyes, their height, the hue of their skins they do not differ. If we were at the trouble to count the number of hairs that adorn their heads, I do not doubt that they would be found to tally to a unit. There are their ages, of course. Fortunately they were not all born on the same day."

"But I confess, my dear friend, it does not seem quite the right thing to make that distinction. I might take the eldest or I might take the youngest, but is not that just the contingency that a sensitive person like myself would wish to avoid ? I would like to find a more adequate reason for imposing captivity upon the eldest beyond the fact that she was the first to enter the world. I should take comfort from such a reason, if it could be found. I should not like to feel that the disabilities of the firstborn, under which I labour myself, had been invested at my hands with an additional gravity."

"Your scruples do you honour, my poor boy, but in this case I confess they are uncomfortable."

"I feel that I must do the right thing. Ha ! I have an expedient. Suppose we place the names of the five in a

hat, and draw out one? Their chances of escape will then be equal; and our choice will be dignified, as it were, with the official sanction of Providence."

"I am afraid your ingenuity is calculated to strike a death-blow to the feminine heart; but I am afraid I can suggest no more poetic remedy."

It was by this process of selection that Harriet became the chosen nymph.

"Ah—Harriet is her name, I see," said the noble valetudinarian, unfolding the slip of paper he had picked out of his hat. "I like her name. I once had an old nurse whose name was Harriet, the kindest old soul I ever knew. Why did I not think of her? She would have resolved at once our sentimental difficulty."

"Fortunately the inspiration does not come too late," said Mrs. Broke, with her mild laugh. "Chance having decreed in Harriet's favour, the choice can still have the cachet of your regard for your old nurse. The dear, devoted old thing! I declare I have fallen in love myself with her fragrant memory. If you will kindly ring the bell, Harry, you shall see the bride-elect."

"Not to-day, I think, if you please," said Harry. "I fear I have done a little too much already. I cannot stand excitement now."

"I would like the child to make your acquaintance under these conditions, my dear Harry, if you don't mind. I cannot help thinking it would be wise for her to see you at your worst, my poor dear boy. The more fragile the flower the more we women cherish it. I confess, Harry, it is against one's preconceived ideas for matrimony to be graced at the altar by the sacred flame of love; but in the case of your nuptials, my poor dear boy, one is prepared to waive them cheerfully. Indeed it would be a piquant conclusion to a romantic episode. You pull the name of your duchess out of a hat, and forthwith she prostrates herself in worship before you. Really, as you sit here now you fulfil one's ideas exactly of the manner in which you ought to make your *début* before the bride-elect."

Upon this excursus the bell was rung and Harriet sent

for. She presently appeared, perfectly simple and childishly youthful of aspect, with a glow of health in her cheeks.

"This is the child, Harry. An honest, dutiful creature, with a sympathetic nature."

"Ha! how d'ye do?" The prospective husband sprang to his feet, and offered a thin, nervous lath of a hand.

Harriet accepted the hand with much gravity. In a few pleasantly bold and incisive strokes Mrs. Broke outlined the relation she had so recently come to occupy. This information also was accepted with gravity. A faint blush may have dappled Harriet's cheek, because the thing was so sudden; she may even have been a little startled; and the large eyes she directed upon the noble valetudinarian may not have been without a tinge of wonder. But such is the value of this particular disciplinary system, that Harriet, observing the matter to be under the ægis of her mother, the all-powerful, and all-wise, accepted the edict as though it were a law of nature.

During the time intervening between the choice of a bride, and the transaction of the thousand and one matters necessary to enable the noble valetudinarian to lead her to the altar, Broke was in Cuttisham several times. On one of these occasions he observed immediately in front of him a bowed and grey-headed figure shuffling along the High Street. There was something strikingly familiar in the back view of this object, yet at that moment, with his preoccupied eyes resting only casually upon it, he was at a loss to know who it might be. The force of recognition was almost ridiculous, and yet it baffled him. When, however, the figure stopped and turned in at the familiar door of Mr. Breffit's estate office, the remarkable and yet remote likeness to his agent rushed upon him.

He desired to consult the old man upon several matters of business. But since Mr. Breffit had gone to live at Tufton Hall he was by no means so accessible as of yore. It was hardly likely that he would be at his office now, for Broke could not bring himself to believe that the bent figure which had passed in front of him was that of the man he wished to see. He decided, however, to inquire.

He was informed that Mr. Breffit was there and would see him. And the moment Broke entered the inner room he was aware of the fact that the old man he had failed to recognize a few moments ago in the street was he who now stood before him.

Broke's powers of observation were peculiarly limited, but he was shocked by the change in his agent. He had last seen him at Tufton a few months ago, a hale and hearty old man, with a keen zest in life and an almost boyish alertness of manner. There was no indication then that anything ailed him. He was one whom you might point out as likely to live to be a hundred years old. Now, however, all was changed. The old vigour was there no longer. In lieu of the vivacious countenance with which he was wont to receive the first of his clients, there was only a mask that had the coldness of death. In every line was the evidence of a pitiful deterioration.

Upon the entrance of Broke this travesty of a once strong man lurched forward to greet him and in the act lost his balance and nearly measured his length on the carpet. The table saved him.

"Ah, Mr. Broke," he said in a dull voice, so little like his habitual eager tone that his old client was shocked by it. "I see it's you. Pleased to see you, sir. Won't you sit down?"

The change in the old man's manner was even more remarkable than the change in his appearance. The supple, brisk, ingratiating air of former days had yielded to a kind of husky vacillation. It seemed to Broke as he looked at him that had it not been old Breffit's boast that he had been a teetotaller all his life he would have supposed he had been drinking heavily.

"'Scuse me, sir," said the old man, reeling before him even now, "but I'm not very well. Not been at all well lately, you know, sir."

"I am indeed sorry to hear that," said Broke in a tone of concern. "What is wrong?"

The old man put his hand to his head with the expression of one who suffers an overpowering pain.

"I—I don't think I quite know myself, sir. I suppose I must be breaking up."

"Surely not, my dear Breffit. Not at your time of life. Why, do you know when I saw you earlier in the summer I made the remark to myself how well you looked. A country life seemed the—ah—very thing for you."

"I gave up the country more than a month ago. I found it did not agree with me, so I returned to Cuttisham, where I was born, where I have lived all my life, and where, Mr. Broke, I mean to die."

Broke was distressed by the tone.

"I—ah—could not have thought that a country life would disagree with anybody," he said.

"Ah, sir, it is not altogether a country life that has upset me. You must not think it is altogether that."

The old man seemed to be gathering his resolution to add something to these words in order to make their meaning plainer; but as he came to the point he stopped and abruptly turned away his face.

"I am really sorry to see you so run down, Breffit," said his oldest client with grave kindness.

When all was said, the old fellow was one of the best and truest friends and servants man ever had. That sight of him installed at Tufton a few months ago, in a place that nature had never intended should belong to him, had caused his gorge to rise against him, it was true. But after all that was but a very minor incident compared with the harmonious intercourse of many years. He was not the man to forget services faithfully rendered. Now to find poor old Breffit broken down utterly in mind and body was to think only of the benefactions received at his hands.

"Have you seen a doctor, Breffit? I—ah—suppose you have. I hope it will not prove so serious as you think. I feel sure that a man of your fine constitution, a constitution that has always been envied by all who have known you, cannot be suffering from old age yet awhile. You are not much the wrong side of sixty?"

"Seventy-one, sir. Although people do say I have never

looked my age. You see, sir, I have led such a busy and active life that I have had no time to grow old. I have been a worker all my life, Mr. Broke, but suddenly it has come upon me that I can work no more. It has come upon me all at once during the last week or two. I am about done, sir, I am about done."

"No, no, my dear Breffit."

"I have had my innings, sir. There is nothing to carry me on now. There is nothing to work for, nothing to look forward to. Oh, my God, I wish to-night I could go to bed and never wake any more!"

With an outburst of querulous passion which, to one of Broke's self-contained spirit, was ineffably shocking, the old man suddenly covered his face with his hands and burst into tears. The next instant, however, he had recovered sufficiently to proceed with his rather piteous monotone.

"At my time of life, you see, sir, a man cannot get new hopes and ideas and begin all over again. He has not the spirit of a younger man to begin building anew when his fine castles that have taken him the best part of a lifetime to set up have fallen about his ears. Only one thing do I ask now, sir, and it is the thing your doctors would deny me if they could. But they will not be able, they will not be able."

"You must not talk like that, Breffit, you must not indeed. Such men as you cannot be spared."

Again the tears began to trickle down the face of his agent.

"You speak very kindly, Mr. Broke, and it gives me pleasure to hear you say that. It comforts me to know I am not despised by everybody."

"I—ah—assure you, my dear Breffit, that so far from being despised you have long been the admiration of many besides myself."

"Ah, sir, you do not know, you do not know! With all your kindness towards one who is old and unhappy you cannot understand. The fact is, I am heart-broken, sir. You cannot know what it is for the children you have

cherished all these long years of anxiety and toil to turn against you."

Broke recoiled involuntarily. The old man's words were like a red-hot wire being drawn across a nerve.

"You don't know what it is, sir, to suffer that from an only son, in whom all your hopes have been centred. You don't know what it is, sir, and you never will know what it is to have your latter days embittered by one whom you have spent the flower of your years in fostering; for whom you would have parted with the coat off your back; to whom you would have given your last penny."

The sweat burst out upon Broke's forehead. He strove to close his ears against the old man's voice.

"I cannot tell you, sir"—there was a horrid voice inside Broke that took a diabolical pleasure in re-echoing every word the old man uttered—"what hopes I had for my boy. I procured him the finest education, sir, school and college too. I brought him up to a high ideal. I bought a noble house and gave it to him; and during my own life, sir, I gave him half my fortune, that he might be able to hold up his head before the world. And now, sir, having done all this, in what manner does he reward me? I will tell you, Mr. Broke. He laughs at me behind my back, and he shuts the door of his house in my face."

A succession of hard sobs barred the old man's voice, and he was compelled to wait until they had passed.

"Yes, sir, he shuts the door of his house in my face, the house I had bought for him in the sweat of my brow. I wonder if those dear children of yours, Mr. Broke, could cause their father that sort of pain? You may well not understand, sir. It had always been a dream of mine, sir, that my boy should grow up to be like yours. I know I am a rough diamond myself; a self-made man as all the world knows. But I wanted my son to be like that fine lad of yours, Mr. Broke. And I did by my boy as you did by yours, sir; I lavished money on his upbringing and afterwards placed him in a position to do it justice. And now—and now——!"

The old man was unable to go on. And an anguish of

spirit not less than his own had been communicated to the listener. The man before him was merged from the machine of business into the human father. The same plaint echoed in both hearts. They were drawn together by the common theme of a son's ingratitude. Broke had sought to banish his own son from his thoughts by an effort of the will ; but he had been taught already that, do what he would, the spectre must be forever lurking in the outskirts of his mind. The analogy between his agent's case and his own was unbearable. Even in his despair, however, there was the spark of comfort that his own son had not been guilty of this degree of sordid meanness. There was that shred of consolation left. Thus, when the winter wind strikes our numb souls, do we stretch the threadbare mantles of our pride to cover them !

"I have not the strength to get over it now," said the maudlin old man. "I am heart-broken. I am not good enough for the fine friends he bought with the money I fought so hard to win for him. He and his fine friends laugh at the old man behind his back, and when one or another of them happens to mistake him for the butler it is the finest joke in the world. It is Mr. Hamilton-Breffit with him now, Mr. George Hamilton-Breffit, with a hyphen. Such a common name as his father's is not good enough for him now. The only thing about me that is good enough for him is my money. That is still good enough for him, just as I was good enough so long as I could be useful. But I cannot be useful to him any more, do you see, sir ? He is to marry the daughter of an earl, and then it will be Mr. George and Lady Augusta Hamilton-Breffit. Of course he could not have such 'a shocking old bounder as me about the place'—I am quoting his own words, sir—could he ? while that was being arranged. But for one thing, Mr. Broke, I rejoice. It was wise and right of you to have none of him. You could see what he was, sir, all the time, with your knowledge of the world, even before my own eyes were opened. Ah, sir, that was a providential thing. It would have grieved me to see such a one polluting such a fine old family as yours. I must ask pardon of you,

Mr. Broke, for ever making the suggestion. But you see, sir, he had not come out in his true colours then."

Overborne by the recital of his sorrows, the old man lurched to a cupboard and produced a glass and a bottle of brandy.

"I have to take a little something now to keep me going," he said apologetically. "I do not think I could bear up under it at all if I did not."

Broke laid his hand on his shoulder, not without emotion.

"Don't you—ah—think, my dear Breffit, that if you—ah—went away to fresh scenes for a bit it might pull you together? Why not travel? I feel sure a doctor would advise it. There is nothing like a complete change to pull a man together."

Mr. Breffit made a hollow laugh.

"It is kindly meant, Mr. Broke, and I thank you, but you don't understand what it means to me. All the change of scene in the world cannot help me. Nothing will ever put me right any more. I don't want to be put right, sir. I am old and lonely and tired. Life has no purpose now. I want to die now and leave my money to a good cause. A quarter of a million is the sum. It seems a lot, does it not, sir? Every penny of it have I earned myself, yet it has brought me no pleasure. A few months ago I was worth double that amount, but half I gave away to him I can never mention more. I don't know what to do with the rest, sir. But I will write off that little item of Mrs. Broke's; and there are several other trifling little items that the estate has owed me at various times that I shall write off too. What are a few pounds like that to me? I have neither kith nor kin in the world but that one; I don't know to what use I can put my money. I should have liked it to have done a little good to somebody, to somebody in whom I took an interest; it has done no good to me and mine. I should like to feel that my life has not been quite in vain."

"No one can—ah—say that, my dear Breffit," Broke was touched keenly by the old man's despair. "I—ah—am not in the habit of—ah—speaking without reflection,

but I can say from my heart that not in our time at any rate shall we—ah—landowners look on your like again.”

The enfeebled old man drank off the brandy he had poured out in the glass. He then peered rather timidly at the first among his clients with a wistful brightness in his dull eyes.

“It gives me pleasure to hear you say that, Mr. Broke; it is just what I should like to have said of me. I—I thank you.”

Suddenly he bent forward to his oldest client with something of his former alertness.

“I wish, Mr. Broke, you were not so proud,” he said wistfully.

Broke did not reply to a charge that he was prepared to sustain against himself. And he was far too obtuse to be able to trace these rather odd words to their source. In his mind there was not the faintest connection between this speech and that which had preceded it. No doubt the poor old fellow was a good deal undermined. The old man, meeting with no response, had not the courage to pursue a subject which had lately come to occupy a place in his thoughts.

“You hear people say,” he continued, with a relapse into his dreary strain, “that wealth means happiness. But from my heart, sir, I say it is a curse. It is the possession of money alone that has brought me to this. It is money that has made my only son a better man than his father. Had I remained poor and he had been poor also he would never have broken my heart by despising me in my old age. Wealth is responsible for evils far beyond those of poverty. I began poor enough, God knows! but when, fifty years ago, I had only bread and cheese to my dinner, life was a very different affair.”

For a long time the old man went on in this strain. Broke remained deeply affected by the change that had taken place in that sane and alert spirit; and he was also oppressed by a certain analogy to those terrible emotions that were corroding his own heart. Thus at the first opportunity he made his escape.

It was well to breathe again the outer air after being confined in that intolerable room reeking with the fumes of brandy. But every step of his way back to Covenden he could not rid his mind of the shadow of the once strong man he had left there. Broke had never had the least tenderness for his agent in his capacity as a human being. He stood to him in the relation of a machine for the conduct of business pure and simple; and more than once the thought had occurred to him that even considered as a machine, he was neither pure nor simple. He had always looked upon him—apart, that was, from his indisputable business gifts—as a rather vulgar charlatan whom it was useful to have at your elbow when you were compelled by the remorseless conditions imposed upon those who happened to be land-owners, landlords, and agriculturists to have dealings with other vulgar charlatans. He had the useful knack of looking after your interests at the same time as he looked after his own. To-day, for the first time, the old man was allowed to take his place in the great human hierarchy. The overthrow of a mind so strong was one of the most painful things Broke had ever witnessed.

All the way home he could think of nothing but that blurred and broken figure. It may have been that he had snatched as from a mirror a glimpse of his own image. It seemed strange indeed that he should find himself with so much in common with such a man as old Breffit. In the bosom of the feudalist the thought seemed fantastic. It almost seemed that one would have to admit that all the world over human nature was akin. To this representative of an elder day the diverse units of the social order not only had a distinguishing set of manners and customs, other modes of speech and dress and points of view, but their souls and bodies and their fundamental emotions were widely different too. It was peculiarly irksome to be in danger of having to admit that such a person as Joseph Breffit could have so much as a heart-beat in common with a person such as Edmund Broke.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE LAST NIGHT

DUST-tarnished summer passed to autumn of the mellow tints and afterwards to the later season of nature's desolation, but it was no more than that of the family of Covenden. The young voices of laughter and merriment seemed to have died with the leaves of those summer days. From the shock of Delia's flight they could not recover. Coming almost immediately upon the episode of their brother it was a crowning blow. It knocked their little world askew ; and in their dazed and wondering fashion they felt that nothing could ever set it right.

They entered into the sudden marriage of Harriet without enthusiasm. All things that had the sanction of their parents they knew how to accept without question, in the same way that they could not tolerate the things that were without it. But they thought with a shudder of the man their sister was to marry.

The night before she was to be married they sat up far beyond their usual hour. They clustered very close together in their common room, all unutterably sad and feeling rather frightened. To have been able to indulge in tears would have been a relief, but that had never been their habit.

" We shall miss you, old Hat," they said. " How we shall miss you ! "

The tight-lipped Harriet clung first in the arms of one and then in those of another. She was very cold and pale and her heart was beating violently.

" I wish you were not going to leave us, Hat," said Philippa mournfully.

Harriet clung to her more convulsively, and buried her cold face against her. There was the harsh, repressed sound of a sob.

As they sat in a half-circle round the fire-place, which had no more than a few dying embers in it, their chins were resting on their hands and their heavy eyes could see nothing but darkness. Out of their slender pocket-money they had subscribed for a wedding present to make to their sister; a riding-whip mounted in silver, with the letter "H" engraved upon the handle. Joan placed it in her hand with a low-voiced apology for its humble character.

"We would have bought you a tiara, old Hat," she said, "with real diamonds in it if only we had had the money. We cannot tell you what we would have bought you if only we had had the money. Oh! how we shall miss you!"

She pressed her lips against her sister's cold cheek.

"The old jolly times will never come back," said Margaret.

"What dear jolly days they have been, but they are over now."

There came a dead hush. They all gazed straight before them, with their eyes growing dimmer and dimmer.

"I wish Del was here," said Jane suddenly and softly.

"Poor little Del!" said Margaret, with an equal suddenness and softness.

"Hush," said Joan.

"Delia is happy," said Harriet, gently putting her arm round the trembling form of Joan.

"Hush," said Joan again.

"We shall never all ride to the meet again with father and Billy and Uncle Charles," said Philippa.

"Hush, hush," said Joan, trembling more violently in the arms of Harriet.

"We did not know what dear sweet times they were," said Philippa. "Only now do we begin to realize it, now that they are gone. It does not seem possible that so much can have changed in one short little year. Still, in those that are to come we shall be able to remember those dear, dear old days, and think that we were happy once."

"Don't!" they implored her.

"I cannot help it," said Philippa, who was shivering in the arms of Margaret.

"But there is perhaps a silver lining to a cloud like this," said Harriet, with a valour that was desperate when accompanied by that white face and that cruelly beating heart. "There will be no more cycling to hounds for you four, will there? The dear, dear old horses will go round now all the season through with the one that Uncle Charles is going to give you. I said good-bye to all of them this morning. And I do believe they knew. They nearly made me cry, the dear old things. I am sure they knew I was leaving them. It will not seem like living at all to be without The Doctor, and Crusader, and The Colonel, and Pat, and Persephone, and Whitenose, and Juliet, and Robin, and poor lame old Prudence."

"Which will you take, old Hat?" said Joan. "Persephone was always your special friend, wasn't she? It was you who gave her a grand-sounding name to make up to her a bit, because she was not quite so well-bred as some of the others. But you shall have one of the thoroughbreds too. There is The Doctor and Pat and Juliet."

"No, Joan," said their sister, with a choking firmness. "I would dearly love one of them just for the sake of the days that will never come back. But it would not be fair. I shall have ever so many horses, although they can never, never be the same."

No amount of persuasion on the part of her self-sacrificing sisters would induce her to change her mind. She too had learned to subdue her private feelings for the common good.

There was present at this last gathering, so mournful, so intimate, so tender beyond expression, a sense of the impending that they could not explain. Billy and Delia were lost to them for ever; their father was ageing visibly every day; to-morrow Harriet was to leave them for a life of unhappiness; but over and above all this present sorrow, there was a sense of something more potent, because unknown, that was to come. Shadows out of the future were

thrown before their eyes. To-night they seemed strangely infected with the sense of tears in mortal things.

Mrs. Broke visited Harriet that night as she lay in her bed, sleepless and wide-eyed. She bent over the white face and touched the cold forehead with her lips.

"It is for us all, my dear one," she said in a low voice. "I thank you for being so sweet, and patient and obedient. It may seem a little hard to you, my dear one; but for your father and myself and your sisters it is also hard. But you have always been so good and brave; and you have never hesitated to help your father and myself in any way that was asked of you. All of you have always been perfectly good and kind and unselfish, always a great comfort to us both."

Harriet, in common with her sisters, had passed her life in fear of the awful being she called mother. She was afraid of her at this moment, although the awful being was talking to her in a manner of tenderness that was entirely new. The prepossessions of a lifetime are not to be uprooted in a minute. Yet her fear of her mother was far less than that of the new life that lay before her. There would be no affectionate bond of sisterhood, no boon companionships; no proud yet tender father, no dear, querulous, kind-hearted Uncle Charles to alleviate the sense of loneliness, or enlighten that black abyss that was called the future. Convulsively as she had clung to her sisters an hour ago, she clung to her mother now.

Mrs. Broke was deeply affected by the passionate silence of the child. The grip of the cold hands, the pressure of the cold cheek against her own, the frozen sobs, the roving, frightened eyes told too poignantly of all that was passing in her. Increasingly difficult as it had become of late, it had never been harder than at this moment to keep the mask of inscrutability upon her face. Her very soul was now falling faint. Life was growing to demand too much. Less and less were the gains becoming worth the price. To what end was all this pinching and scraping and contriving, this frenzy of expedience? She pressed a last kiss on the cold lips, and quitted the room with unsteady

haste. She went down to her husband, who sat reading the *Field* in the enfolding gloom and silence of the library. At the sound of her entrance he put down the newspaper, and looked at his wife earnestly.

"Well, old girl."

Of late he had exhibited a tenderness for her which she was inclined to feel as slightly exaggerated in one of such a self-contained and frugal spirit.

"You look tired," he said, peering at her through the shadows cast by the reading-lamp. "You work that brain of yours too hard. I wish you didn't overdrive it quite so much. You want a rest."

Mrs. Broke forced a laugh. Somehow it jangled a discord among his nerves.

"Suppose you go to the sea for a fortnight and take the girls? They want a change, too."

"Yes, Edmund, if you come also."

"What do I want with a change? I am as strong as an oak tree. Besides, what about the shoot next week?"

His wife looked only at his heavy eyes and his sunken cheeks. The appearance of the robust, ruddy farmer of the early summer was with him no more. In a few brief months he had completely changed. As they looked at one another a curious silence fell suddenly between them. They were both thinking of the same thing.

"I wish we had not this wedding to-morrow," said Broke, terminating the silence with the same old abruptness with which it had begun. "We shall miss poor little Hat very much."

"The child is very brave and good. But it is another vacant place. One hardly understands what they mean to one until they go. Three in a few brief months! Do you not think, Edmund, you could make it only two?"

"What do you mean?" said Broke, with a harsh change in his voice.

"Will you not go to the cottage and see that poor lonely child? It might make things easier for her; and I am sure it would for us."

Broke's face had altered completely.

“ When will you begin to understand that if certain books are closed they cannot be opened again ? ”

“ Never.”

“ Why this—ah—morbid craving to reopen old wounds ? ”

“ It is by that means, Edmund, and that means only, that we shall be brought to recognize the blindness and futility of our acts.”

“ Good night. I am going to bed.”

Broke rose from his chair as abruptly as he spoke, and walked out of the room.

CHAPTER XL

IN WHICH MR. BREFFIT THE ELDER WRITES OFF ANOTHER
LITTLE ITEM OF HIS ACCOUNT

A FEW days afterwards there came a painful piece of news. Old Mr. Breffit had fallen downstairs and broken his neck. Broke and his wife were greatly shocked.

"Poor, poor old man," said Mrs. Broke. "And on the eve, too, of his son's marriage."

"There is a story attached to that," said Broke darkly. "Perhaps it may be worth telling."

Thereupon he gave a few salient particulars of his last singular interview with the old man at Cuttisham.

"I remember it made a rather horrible impression upon me at the time. I believe he was drinking himself to death then. There was a great change in the poor fellow. I call the whole business as pitiable as anything I have ever known."

"It is tragedy," said Mrs. Broke. "Poor unfortunate man, that he should spend his life in the pursuit of a thing that was so bitterly to recoil upon him! Fate is very cruel. The poor old man must be enormously wealthy."

"He told me the exact figures, but I forget them. By the way, he said one rather odd thing. He said he was at a loss to know what to do with the quarter of a million or so he had not already given to his son. He assumed that he would have to bestow it on deserving charities as he had no other kin. And then I remember the old fellow said suddenly, in a very odd, queer way, 'I wish you were not so proud, Mr. Broke.' At the time I did not take his meaning, but it struck me afterwards that he may have looked on me as a deserving charity also."

“ Perhaps he did, Edmund.”

“ He may. Even at that time he was rather far gone.”

“ Had this idea occurred to you sooner how would you have answered him ? ”

“ Well, I suppose one would have been forced to laugh at the maudlin old fellow, although one would not have liked to have given him pain. I never saw a man change so much in so short a time.”

This chance phrase of Mr. Breffit's and the hebetude of her husband in regard to it were a source of unhappiness to Mrs. Broke. In her own mind she heightened its significance until it shone forth as a deliberate renunciation of a sum of money that would have set them on their legs again. Strictly speaking, it was nothing of the kind ; but so prone are our minds to magnify the might-have-been that a fact trivial in itself assumed great proportions.

There was another aspect to the case that had better reason for causing her distress. The sum of two thousand pounds she had borrowed from Mr. Breffit would be demanded more peremptorily by the executors of his estate than by the old man himself.

“ I don't know what we shall do when they come down upon us,” said Mrs. Broke. “ If they were to distrain upon our personal goods I do not think they would make two thousand pounds. In any case, we shall be obliged to let Covenden almost at once.”

“ I—ah—think you take an extreme view,” said Broke, but his face had a fluttered look of alarm. “ I—ah—ah—believe Breffit said he would not press for the money ; although, as soon as we get it, it shall certainly be repaid. But I—ah—think we had better not bother our heads about it just now. Things have always sorted themselves out for us a bit in one way or another.”

“ You remind me, Edmund, of the statesman who said the other day in regard to this hideous mess in South Africa that he supposed we should ‘ muddle through ’ as we had so often done before. It is reassuring to find two such representative Britons taking such a statesmanlike view of the predicament in which you find yourselves.”

"We must keep pegging away, anyhow," said Broke. "You—ah—will find that things will come out all right in the end."

"Now that Mr. Breffit is no more we shall have to get a new agent. It is hardly likely that his son will carry on the business. I shudder to think how serious a matter it may prove. Our affairs are so hopelessly involved that it may be impossible to get a new man to undertake the responsibility. It is only now that Mr. Breffit is gone that we shall fully realize what we owe him. I am convinced—although in the case of a man with such a reputation for hard business qualities the statement may seem absurd—that he has lost rather than gained by the transaction of our affairs."

"I cannot believe that," said Broke doughtily.

"I am convinced it is so, Edmund, of late years at least. We owe that old man a debt of gratitude. I really believe that, since he came to be so prosperous, all Mr. Breffit has done for us has been a labour of love. Unless his services had been purely disinterested we could not possibly have weathered the storm so long. I believe, Edmund, that you personally were a sort of hero to him. You were his *beau idéal* of the landed proprietor, the pattern of what he could have wished to be himself, had his lot at the beginning been cast in other and easier places. And I know that you and yours stood for the model on which he tried to form his son. He has told me so more than once."

"Good God! I—ah—hope the likeness he has—ah—produced is not flattering."

"Let us hope not; but to me the whole thing is very touching. We may smile at the old man, but we could not have done without him all these years. And, Edmund, I am convinced that the only thing to do now is to submit to the inevitable. Covenden must be given up. To keep it on another year is impossible. There is no quarter now to which we can look for help to tide things over."

These were bitter and grievous words to Broke. To give up Covenden, the home from immemorial time of him and his and all that he held dear, struck right at his heart. He would as lief have given up life itself. But he knew that

his wife did not exaggerate. Circumstances had forced him to recognize that his affairs were in a very dire state. But he was only just beginning to realize how hard they had been hit by the death of Breffit. Here again his wife was to be trusted implicitly. She was far better acquainted with their complex dealings than was he. But the plain facts she had unfolded of the benevolence of that strange old man galled him bitterly. He was the last person in the world to submit to deliberate benefactions. But it seemed that the whirlpool of events in whose vortex he had been caught was stronger, subtler, more inexorable than even his most cherished prejudices.

Presently there came a day when the tragic death of old Breffit acquired a new phase for the family of Covenden. The particulars of it were embodied in a small packet addressed to Broke from a firm of solicitors. It consisted of two letters: one, in a familiar spidery handwriting addressed to Broke himself; the other in one more clerkly and official to his son Billy. The former communication was as follows:

“DEAR MR. BROKE,—I have been thinking a good deal during the last few days of the use to which I shall devote the remainder of my fortune, hoping and trusting as I do that my end is now very near. And it has seemed to me better to place it at the disposal of one in whom I have taken a deep interest, rather than at the disposal of a charitable institution of which I should know little. To that end I have caused my will to be altered in favour of your son, Mr. William. He may, of course, not choose to make use of my money; but if the assurance is likely to carry any weight, I should like it to be made to him that his acceptance of the remainder of my considerable fortune will confer an obligation on one who is old and unhappy. I shall then be able to feel that after all my money is doing some real good to somebody in the world, to somebody in whom I hope it is not presumptuous to say I have long taken a deep interest. I may add the gross value of the estate which I wish to be allowed to make over to your son is some two hundred and seventy thousand pounds, as nearly as I can approximate, less death duties and

various small legacies to servants, and fees and expenses of executors. I remain, dear Mr. Broke, always yours truly,

“JOSEPH BREFFIT.”

Broke's meditations on this remarkable document were long and deep. At last he was so far able to detach himself from them as to take his wife into his confidence. He gave her the letter. She read it with a reeling brain.

“It is impossible at first to understand all that it means,” she said in a feeble voice. “One has to read it over and over before one can realize it.”

“I—ah—do not see that it means anything.”

“It assures the future of Billy.”

The muscles of Broke's face were under such control that it remained a mask.

“It therefore assures the future of us all.”

In the rush of feeling the letter provoked Mrs. Broke could not repress a certain excitement.

“It—ah—does nothing of the kind,” said Broke.

“Surely, Edmund, a stroke of providence of this bewildering nature will cause you to reconsider the position you have taken up. Surely a thing that means so much to us all will help you to forget.”

“I—ah—fail to see that the case is altered in any way. I—ah—cannot discuss it.”

“Are there no limits to your unreason, Edmund? Is it possible you are still blind to the fate that threatens to overwhelm you? Is it possible you do not understand what this bequest means to you personally? If you persist in this attitude you will be guilty not only of a crime against yourself, but against that which you value more.”

The only reply Broke made to these words was to walk out of the room.

All the same, wrought upon greatly by this extraordinary stroke of fortune, Mrs. Broke could not forbear to rejoice. For the time being she declined to look at the dark side of the picture as represented by Broke's attitude. It was enough that the sordid exigencies of the moment, the eternal need of mere pence, were once for all allayed. And what a

door was opened for reconciliation ! In the first flush of her gratitude to an inscrutable providence she allowed herself to foresee that as soon as Broke was obliged to give his sanction to one of their children, he would be forced to give it to the other.

Under the spur of her excitement, Mrs. Broke lost no time in going to the cottage to tell the wonderful news. But even as she entered it she was conscious that the atmosphere in which the place was enveloped was in strange contrast to the joy in her own heart. There was a pall of desolation upon it. The light had gone out of the lives of the two lonely women. Their brief happiness had perished all too soon. In spite of the pure country air the young wife seemed to grow every day more fragile.

When Mrs. Broke came to the cottage that memorable morning of November, and opened the door, aunt and niece were seated at a table before a bright fire. They were reading a letter that had arrived recently from South Africa, although both could have repeated every word of it by heart already. Upon the entrance of their good friend they rose immediately. Mrs. Broke kissed her daughter-in-law with much tenderness.

“ I have brought great news for you, my dear child—oh, so great ! ”

“ I—I think we know it, ma’am, already,” said Miss Sparrow, with a kind of triumph in her timid voice.

“ Surely not, my dear Miss Sparrow. The lawyers could hardly have written to you, as they do not know your address. Still, they may have found it out ; lawyers are so clever.”

“ Oh, no, ma’am, not the lawyers. Mr. William wrote to us himself.”

“ But surely, my dear Miss Sparrow, *he* can hardly know of it yet.”

“ Oh, yes, ma’am, here it is written in his own handwriting. Is not this the great news that you mean, ma’am ? Promotion has come to him very quickly, has it not ? considering it is only about a month since he rejoined the army as a private soldier. But they are very quick in the army. They

soon find out what a man is worth, as I have heard my Uncle Edward say."

In proud confirmation of this fact the old woman placed Billy's letter in the hands of his mother. She indicated the all-important passage with her finger. It ran: "I am now a full-blown sergeant in the Rhodesian Light Horse. It is not so bad, is it? seeing that I was a trooper for only about nine days. If I go on at this rate I shall be commanding a brigade in about a year!"

"The news I have brought you is better even than that," said Mrs. Broke.

Aunt and niece looked at her in bewilderment. She allowed them to enjoy the delicious thrill of expectation.

"You don't mean to say, ma'am, they have made him a troop sergeant-major already," said the excited Miss Sparrow. "Because if they have, ma'am, I call it wonderful. My Uncle Edward came to be a troop sergeant-major in the Ninth Hussars, but it took him years and years. It is very wonderful if they have, ma'am, although Mr. William is such a wonderful young gentleman."

"No, my dear Miss Sparrow, it is something even better. A letter came this morning to tell us that he had come into a great fortune, quite unexpectedly. There is no reason now for him to stay away from you another day. What do you say to that? Is not the news glorious?"

The old woman began to weep softly, which is, perhaps, the only true method of expressing feminine joy. In the bright eyes of the girl was a hungry radiance. But the pale lips were compressed.

"Come, my dear child," said Mrs. Broke, "I am sure this will make you happy. Billy will come back at once; and it will not be necessary for you ever to part again from one another."

"He will never come back," said the young wife, with a desolate quietude.

"That is very wrong, my dear child. We cannot have you talk so. You are a little depressed; you must keep up your courage. I hope you have drunk all the port wine I sent you. Some more is coming to-day."

The fragile thing shook her head.

"What can have put these unhappy thoughts into your head, I wonder? You must not give way to these fancies, particularly at a time like this, when you need all your strength."

Again the young wife shook her head. She pressed a thin hand to her bosom.

"I have something here in my heart," she said, "that tells me he will never return. As soon as this terrible war broke out I saw clearly in what way God intended to punish me."

"But why should He punish you?"

"Because I have been so wicked; because in trying to gain my own happiness I have marred that of others—of others who are so much better and nobler in every way than I am myself."

"Who has put these foolish and cruel fancies into your mind, my dear child? What mischievous nonsense is this?"

"They have all come there out of my own thoughts. I was blind at first, blind with love; but my eyes are open now and I can see. I have ruined my husband."

"Your husband is anything but ruined. He is now a very rich man indeed; and I am going to write to him now, from his own home, to tell him of his wonderful good luck, to tell him the condition of his wife, and that his affairs require his immediate presence in England. Can you find me a pen and ink, and writing-paper and an envelope, Miss Sparrow? You can then see exactly what I write."

With a finely feminine disregard of the circumstances in which Billy was at that moment placed, Mrs. Broke wrote her letter. Her commands were very peremptory. His absence was breaking the heart of his wife, who had the sorest need of him. She informed him that a sum of two hundred and seventy thousand pounds had come to him from a wholly unexpected quarter. She omitted, however, to state the source whence it came. When she had written her letter she read it aloud. She was very anxious to impress the minds of the two women with the fact that this rare piece

of good fortune had actually come to pass, and that their days of repining would soon be at an end.

"There, my dear child, you can read it for yourself. You shall stamp the envelope. And for his sake and that of another you must try to be happy and of good faith until he comes again into this little room. It means but a short week or two of waiting."

Alice shook her head.

"God will know how to punish me," she said.

In spite of her resolute will Mrs. Broke was oppressed. The tragic gloom in the girl's mind haunted her so much that even the new hope born of that day's news was overthrown. It had seemed as though at last their luck had begun to turn. But the mood in which she had found Alice had done much to dispel the illusion. There was an air of finality with which she predicted the event she foresaw as though it had already come to be.

Indeed, with Alice the happy circumstance that had brought Mrs. Broke to the cottage did not weigh at all. The outbreak of war in South Africa, coming at such a moment in her life, dominated her with the sense of its inexorable purpose. Her obsession was such that it seemed to her that millions of people had been plunged into anguish that one erring, obscure soul in a remote country place might be visited with the implacable justice of heaven.

During that humiliating week in December in which misfortune was heaped upon misfortune's head, there was only one matter for men's minds, only one topic for their lips.

Mrs. Broke was much too adroit to permit a state of things that had welded all sects and classes of the community into a common bond of feeling to pass without trying to turn it to account. One evening she said to her husband:

"There is one circumstance, Edmund, which I feel you ought to know. Billy is at the Front."

Broke had the lethargy of many generations in him, but he seemed to feel the shock of the announcement. In a momentary spasm of bewilderment, he held up his hand to stay the words of his wife.

"It is useless, Edmund. He is our boy, and you shall hear." She moved between him and the door.

"No, no, no," he said in a hollow tone.

The note of weary impotence was rather piteous. Mrs. Broke, far from being melted by it, grew more inexorable. Her shaft had struck home.

"He enlisted as a trooper in the Rhodesian Light Horse. He has been promoted already to the rank of sergeant."

"Well?" gasped Broke involuntarily, in spite of himself.

"Well?"

They found themselves standing face to face, looking into the eyes of one another. The close lips of the one, and the hard, short breathing and the convulsive breast of the other, who was the woman, told a tale.

"He is our boy," she said defiantly.

Broke turned his back.

"Our boy, Edmund."

He walked away from her to the farthest end of the large room. She followed him up and took him by the sleeve of his coat. The courage she had received from his momentary confession of weakness was still in her.

"Edmund, I insist that you hear what I say. He is serving his country in the way of his race these many hundreds of years. It is your duty as an Englishman not to overlook that."

Long ago she had surrendered the time-honoured rôle of austere woman of the world. In a speech of this kind the urbane reserves of a high priestess of that cult were far to seek. There was still, however, enough of sensitiveness in her to make her wince at the thought that she was grovelling before a Juggernaut whose wheels were passing and repassing over her heart.

"He is expiating his offence, Edmund, in the service of his country."

Broke did not look at her, nor did he speak. She had hit him hard, but he was too dogged a fighter to let her know it. The satisfaction was hers, however, of noting that if there was an arid vacancy in his face, there was a haggard weariness in his eyes

CHAPTER XLI

BARBED WIRE

THAT was not a fortunate Christmas for the family of Covenden. On the eve of that festival occurred one of those incidents that do so much to irreconcile us to the conditions of tenure of our mortal lot. Wanton accidents occur sometimes in the well-ordered scheme of life, for no better purpose, as far as our limited vision will allow us to judge, than the destruction of any theories we may have formed concerning it.

The previous night and the early morning of the hallowed twenty-fourth of December had had a fog and a white frost. About ten o'clock, however, the fog lifted, and the sun made a gracious appearance. With it came Lord Bosket in great heart, fully equipped for the chase.

"Marvellous climate! Two hours ago I would have laid a thousand to five there would ha' been no meet this mornin'. But you never know your luck. The frost is givin' everywhere, and we shall be as right as rain by the time we are ready for a move. But I see you little fillies had more faith than I had. You are all ready to start, and Edmund too."

"Father predicted it last night, Uncle Charles," said Joan with her inveterate pride in the judgment of that omniscient person. "About nine o'clock he looked out, and just caught a glimpse of the moon up the valley, and he said it would be all right for this morning."

Lord Bosket drained his glass with an immense satisfaction.

"Wonderful eye you've got for the weather, Edmund. It's a gift. I can never read the signs like that, although I

have lived in the country all my life. I believe these little gals have got it too. It's a gift, just the same as an eye for the work of hounds and the lie of a country. I believe any one of you little gals would hunt the pack better than I could myself."

"Oh, no, Uncle Charles," they cried in a flattered and delighted chorus. "That would be impossible."

"But you'd hunt it as well, what?"

"We are quite sure we could not, Uncle Charles."

"I am blowed if I am," said their uncle proudly. "There is not a hound in the pack whose note you don't know half a mile off, and that you don't know what he can do better than I can. Why, if they were mute, and you were in blinkers, I'd lay a thousand to five you'd tell every one of 'em by the patter of their feet."

"I believe they would, Charles," said their father, with an approach to his old indulgent laugh.

Sometimes their father and their uncle were a little fulsome, perhaps. They were just the type to appeal to such a pair of sportsmen. Their form, their knowledge, their total surrender to the all-absorbing business of the chase had conquered even the higher criticism, which in the hunting-field is not always kind to their sex. They rode to hunt; they did not hunt to ride. Their appreciation of the points of the longest and most trying run would have done no discredit to the cleverest huntsman who ever carried the horn. They did not ride to hounds for the purpose of showing off the weaknesses of human nature. They were as full of tradition as the name they carried. They had the hereditary knack, improved to perfection—and in the hunting-field there is such a thing as perfection—by loving, ever-vigilant tutelage, and an infinite capacity for taking pains.

The result was the grand manner. Just as any art conceived under certain skyey influences and reared under special conditions may attain to a noble simplicity, the style of these sportswomen at the covert-side had a similar significance. Art concealed art in their case. There, as always in their daily lives, they were perfectly quiet and

self-effacing, but the qualities that lay beneath that unemotional exterior came out in a manner that you would not have thought to be possible in such commonplace creatures. They made the business of hunting the fox look such a simple affair that there were those who attributed their knack of living with hounds to luck quite as much as to judgment. Many persons could be cited in support of this theory, persons who had more dash, more horses and better, in fact *more* of everything, including a visible determination to shine, who had served a long apprenticeship to this particular country, which was as big as any to be found in the Shires. But at the same time it was idle for any of these performers to pretend that they claimed equal rank with these unprepossessing young women.

"Fact is, Broke, they are classics, and that's all there is to be said," was the verdict of a certain hard-riding old warrior who had broken more bones in the service of Diana than he had in the service of his country. Small wonder it was that their proficiency was a source of delight to their father and their Uncle Charles. And to Broke at least it provided an argument in support of his favourite dogma. "I should like to see the daughters of your mushroom people with their eye for a country," was a speech that had fallen from his lips. And often enough, when riding home in the company of his brother-in-law in the sore satisfaction of a hard day, had he said: "What hands they've got, Charles. They make you feel like a bear performing on horseback in a circus."

"Damn it, they'd take a donkey over Leicestershire," their uncle would reply.

It may have been the approach of Christmas which made them once again, for one brief hour, so buoyant of spirit and so full of pleasant anticipation. As they prepared to set forth that morning it was almost like old times. Thus far the winter months had been shorn of their glamour by the pangs of bereavement; and by the too-evident change that was taking place in their father, that first of friends and comrades. But this raw morning, softened a little by the tardy arrival of the sun, the gloom was lifted for the time

being from their hearts. Even their father seemed a little more cheerful. Their laughter was heard again for this one brief instant, their eyes were seen to sparkle to their uncle's praises; and presently they sallied forth, the four of them who now remained, in the company of their proud and indulgent guardians, to meet Trotman with the hounds.

Even their mother, who as a rule took so perfunctory an interest in their doings, observed this manner of their setting out, so sharply did it contrast with the gloomy quietude that had accompanied them all the winter. Perhaps Mrs. Broke cherished the hope that this might be something in the nature of a reversion to the old order of things, when their spirits were invariably high and their laughter infectious. It might be that, in the elastic fashion of youth, they were recovering from the tragic loss of Billy and Delia and the marriage of Harriet, which all that season had weighed upon them so heavily.

Strong in this thought, she went to her sitting-room and surrendered herself to a stern conflict with Christmas bills. The unequal battle she had waged so long with importunate tradesmen still went on; and grew more unequal as it proceeded. Whatever the resources of her diplomacy, many of them now declined longer to be put off. For years had they been met with an indomitable tact, but the accumulation of unpaid bills that this morning she was called upon to survey filled her with a sense of the impotence of her struggles.

There was still, however, one asset remaining: the fortune that had come in such a providential fashion to Billy. She felt sure she could count on his help. At the last interview she had had with him at the cottage, just before he had sailed for South Africa, he had expressed his deep gratitude to her for all she had done for his wife. Even as she recalled this fact she was stung by the sordid nature of her thoughts, which in turn shaped themselves into the reflection that poverty is a sordid and debasing thing. But, after all, she could hardly be said to be acting for herself. Were not her efforts in the interest of her small community, and therefore on behalf of Billy himself? Thus at that moment,

under the goad of a humiliating need, she supplemented the letter she had recently written to her son in the name of his wife, with a personal appeal on behalf of the family of Covenden. If he did not return at once or send his power of attorney, the old place which was so dear to them all might be sold over their heads.

The writing of this letter gave her great pain. She was possessed by a sense of the remorseless nature of Broke's resentment against his son, of his resentment, moreover, of the miraculous source whence his new-found wealth had sprung. She felt the whole matter to be humiliating and ironical. Therefore she wrote with a hurried copiousness that sprang first-hand from a sense of shame; and hastily sealed the letter without venturing to read a line she had written.

In the afternoon she turned again to the disentanglement of their affairs. She scrutinized accounts, examined bank-books, and summed up in the explicit value of pounds, shillings and pence all their sources of revenue. Unlet farms and agricultural depreciation told too sad a tale. Without the assistance of poor old Mr. Breffit, one of the queerest gods that ever came out of any machine, the tottering edifice that so long had braved the trend of things must years ago have fallen down.

She was still poring over these documents in the last hour that remained of the grey winter daylight, when she was startled by the sound of a horse galloping along the carriage drive. Almost immediately she caught a glimpse of a horseman flying past the window of the room in which she sat. A little disconcerted by an incident which struck her as decidedly unusual, she waited rather uneasily for its development. In her practical mind there was no effect, however odd, that had not an intimate relation to cause. Therefore she had already anticipated the appearance of the butler when he came to her a minute later.

"What is it, Porson?"

There was a keen anxiety in her tone.

"One of the hunt servants is here and wishes to see you, ma'am. I—I think something has happened."

"I will see him. Will you please bring a light?"

By the time Porson had reappeared with a lamp and the room had been invaded by a breathless, overheated and muddy presence, Mrs. Broke had a clear prevision of the worst, and was prepared to support a recital of it.

"I hope it is not a fatal accident."

Her calm tone surprised the bearer of the news. That distressed rustic had ridden in a fever of anxiety, and all the way had he laboured under the weight of his instructions. He was to go as fast as he could, yet at the same time he was to break, as far as possible, the tidings of misfortune to Mrs. Broke. He had not revealed a word of his errand as yet, but it would seem that already she knew what it was.

"No, ma'am, not fatal as yet."

"Which?" she asked, numbed as by a blow.

"Can't say, ma'am; they're all alike as peas; can't tell t'other from which. But it is one of the Miss Brokes, ma'am; although Dr. Walker says you are not to be alarmed. But you was to have a bed made up in the lib'ry at once, although you was to be sure not to be alarmed. They'll be here in a bit."

Without waiting to hear further details Mrs. Broke rang for the housekeeper.

"If you have any of those small hospital beds in the house, Mrs. Smith," she said, "let one be brought down. If you have not, please improvise one with mattresses near the fire."

"How far have they to come?" she then asked the bearer of the news. "Do you think they will be long?"

"Well, ma'am, they've got a good three mile. It happened yon side Raisby. And they'll be slow, I reckon, as they are having to carry her."

"Is she unconscious?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am."

The composure of Mrs. Broke seemed slightly inhuman by comparison with the agitation of the bearer of the tidings.

"Do you know how it happened?"

"Barbed wire, ma'am. Dr. Walker says it's murder. The

pore hoss come down and broke 'is back, and they do say, ma'am, the pore young lady was pitched on her head, and the pore hoss afterwards rolled ov-ver her. I didn't see it myself, but that's how it happened, so they say. It was the end of a hard day, you see, ma'am, and I dare say the pore hoss would be tiring a bit, and was not able to allow enough. But Dr. Walker says it's murder, ma'am, and beggin' pardon, so it is. His lordship's about out of his mind."

The grim anticipations in the heart of the mother had been borne out by this grisly narrative. Presently she went to superintend the arrangements that were being made in the library, but in her heart there was no hope. She still had resolution enough to set herself steadfastly to the purpose in hand, even if for the moment the spirit seemed hardly capable of sustaining its burden. A sure instinct, as powerful as the tide of events that was crushing her and hers to the dust, led her to expect the worst. There was no reason to believe that the fate which had dogged their steps for twelve months past would relent in such an hour as this.

The library was soon set in readiness, and afterwards there was nothing for the shattered woman but to await.

"Do you know which it is, ma'am?" said the house-keeper.

"I do not."

"I expect it will be Miss Joan."

"Why, Mrs. Smith, do you think that?"

"If you happen to think the least little bit more of one than you do of another, that is the one that is sure to be taken."

"That is a rather uncomfortable theory, Mrs. Smith."

"Yes, ma'am, I dare say. But I could never see why a thing that takes root in your heart should be plucked out again. I suppose it is the self-indulgence."

"An uncomfortable philosophy, Mrs. Smith."

"Yes, ma'am, I dare say. But your endurance is not for everybody. I hope the day will never come, ma'am, when it will be broken down."

Mrs. Smith, a discreet and sensible person as a rule, shook

her head in the manner of those hard-eyed seers who look into the future by the light of the past.

The period of waiting was hard to bear. By an exercise of the will, Mrs. Broke returned to her accounts, and tried to grapple again with those daunting documents that also told so sad a tale. The more closely they were examined the more clearly did disaster reveal itself. Yes, ruin was staring them in the face. But even that had little power over her mind now. Her labours had become perfunctory. Every time the fire creaked in the grate, or the cold wind swung the branch of a tree against the window, she lifted her head to listen. The suspense made her ache.

At last her alert, nervous ears caught a confusion of noises up the drive. She could hear the slow and muffled sound of many feet tramping through the crisp air of the evening, which had already begun to freeze again. She could also detect a murmur of low voices. She went back to the library to bestow a final glance upon the preparations that had been made, and then went out again into the hall, where the servants, several of whom were bearing lights, had been already marshalled near the entrance doors. The old butler had had both thrown back wide, and was standing pale and white-haired out in the portico. The rays from the lamp he held in his hand made the tears look like quicksilver as they ran down his face.

Broke, Lord Bosket, Dr. Walker, and three of the girls were the first of the mournful procession to come into view round the ivy that covered the angle of the outer wall. One of them was bearing an old and battered bowler hat, with a broken brim. Mrs. Broke went out to meet them. Her brother was the first to pass her.

“ Which, Charles ? ”

Lord Bosket hung his head limply, and passed swiftly into the spacious dimness of the house. As the light fell on his puffy red face it was seen to be in the same condition of emotion as the butler's. She touched her husband on the shoulder.

Broke, without glancing at her, strode quickly into the spacious dimness too.

"It is Joan, mother," said Philippa in a calm voice. "She is not dead."

"Dead! Oh, dear no, nor anything like it!" said Dr. Walker in a tone of rough reassurance.

The red-faced old family practitioner, who would have been the first to allow that he knew far less about the profession of medicine than he did of the art of riding to hounds, turned to Mrs. Broke in his abrupt, gruff way that yet had an odd sort of kindness in it.

"Dead! Of course not. An unlucky Christmas for you, though. I hope I shall not come across the man who put up that wire. I should like to have the pleasure of hanging him."

By this time some of the members of the hunt and one or two of the hunt servants had arrived at the hall door with a strange burden in their midst. It was a farm gate, to which had been added a mattress from a labourer's cottage, and on the top of it was a scarcely visible something covered by blankets and coats. The doctor superintended the introduction of this odd form of litter into the entrance hall. The gate was then discarded, and the mattress and its burden were carried into the library. It called for the very nicest care to get them through the various doorways and past the many awkward angles, which too palpably had not been designed for the reception of such unwieldy things.

Once inside the library, the mattress was lifted bodily on to the improvised couch in front of the fire of blazing logs, and the wearisome labours of these friends were at an end. Mrs. Broke left the doctor alone in the library to make a fuller examination than he had been able to do in the field. In the most complete manner she kept her self-control. She personally thanked each of the bearers; and saw to it that the anxious friends who had flocked into the house to get more definite news were given tea and other refreshment.

When she returned to the doctor in the library he had concluded his further examination, and was now seated at a table writing out a telegram.

"Will you tell me precisely what you think?"

Dr. Walker took a huge handkerchief out of his scarlet coat, and mopped his red face very deliberately.

"Got a dog's chance," he said gruffly; "and when you've said that you've said all. I should like MacLachlan."

"By all means."

"I am wiring. Better send somebody with it to Cuttisham—no office nearer. Better take a bicycle. Every minute counts."

Mrs. Broke went herself to execute these commands. When she returned Dr. Walker was standing by the side of the mattress looking intently at the form stretched upon it. By a supreme effort she was able to go to his side. The coat by which Joan had been covered was withdrawn; and she lay extended full length on the mattress, with her hunting tops protruding below her habit. The grey pallor of her face was in cruel contrast to the bloom of ruddy health that was ever to be seen upon it. The only relief to it was a dark splotch of blood beside one of her ears. Her eyes were closed, she was quite still, and the only evidence of life remaining in her was a sound of hard breathing that could be distinctly heard. The mother did not flinch, although in her veins was a strange numbness as if she had that instant suffered the stab of a knife.

"We must have patience, I suppose—I suppose we can only wait."

At the hushed sound of the familiar tones, it almost seemed as if the closed eyelids lifted a little, as though sudden light had fallen upon them.

"Can't move without MacLachlan."

"How long must we wait?"

"If everything goes right he might catch the seven-twenty from Paddington. He should be here in four hours."

"Four hours!"

The indomitable woman shivered a little.

"If we are lucky. If we are not lucky he may not be here before midnight or nine o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Surely there is some one else, some one more certain, some one nearer at hand!"

"Not for this. It is MacLachlan or nobody."

“He knows the great urgency?”

For the first time that evening the sorely tried woman was showing signs of pressure. They were slight enough, but she had to make the effort to correct them.

“Ha! here’s Harris,” said Dr. Walker. “I sent to Cuttisham for Harris. He can’t do more than I’ve done already, but I thought he ought to be here.”

The door of the library had opened to admit a benevolent, white-headed, bewhiskered, heavy-watch-chained old gentleman who bore in every fold of his ample frock-coated person the unimpeachable evidences of the family physician of great repute. Every step that he took was accompanied by a purr and a creak. His eminence owed less in the local esteem to his professional gifts than to the perfection of manner he bore to the bedside. It was partly based on a facile sympathy, partly on a sound working knowledge of human nature. The number of occasions on which his name had appeared in the wills of deceased old ladies of the neighbourhood was supposed to have long precluded his practising his calling as a means of livelihood.

He tip-toed across the carpet and bowed to Mrs. Broke with the deferential grace of a high priest among courtiers.

“Cchk, cchk,” he said, clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth, “Cchk, cchk, Walker, what have we here?”

“Fractured base,” said Dr. Walker, in a gruff undertone.

Dr. Harris glanced for a moment at the face of the loud-breathing sufferer, and then, placing his hands behind him, marched with his colleague to the extreme end of the room. For some time they stood there solemnly together. All that passed between them was :

“Wired for MacLachlan.”

“Quite right.”

There was nothing left for them to do but await the arrival of the great surgeon from Portland Place. If she lived until that time something might be attempted, and there was still that hope for her. But, one way or the other, they were by no means prepared to speculate upon a very slender chance.

For about an hour Joan lingered in a condition that might be called by the name of consciousness, and then came another lapse into complete oblivion. Her mother remained in the room with the two doctors. She felt the suspense to be eating into her soul like an acid. All depended on the arrival of the surgeon from London; but the tardiness of telegraph wires and railway trains forbade his presence in that room under four hours at the earliest. The ticking of the slow minutes in their passing soon became so intolerable that she stopped the clock. She then turned to "Bradshaw," the guide, the solace and the despair of so many hearts that Christmas Eve; but no mitigation was possible of that terrible term of four grim, tormenting hours at the earliest.

Mrs. Broke began to chafe at the inaction of the two doctors. It was as much as she could endure to think that Joan lay within arm's length of them fighting for her life, while they were unable to lift a finger to help her. It might be going hard with her because of some little aid that was withheld. The torment of the thought was very hard to bear. The four hours seemed as far off as four years. The conviction began to press on her heart that to live through that period would be impossible for her, let alone for her eldest daughter. She seemed to have passed through a lifetime already since the telegram was sent, but it made rather less than forty minutes by her watch. More than three hours had yet to pass; and then it might be that after all the surgeon would miss his train. Was it too much to ask that some visible effort be made to postpone her daughter's dying against the time of the surgeon's arrival?

"Can you do nothing?" she said at last. "Surely the time is so long that she may die before the surgeon comes."

"We can hope," said Dr. Walker gruffly.

"For the best," chimed Dr. Harris, with a creak and a purr.

Dr. Harris stretched his hands to the fire.

"Freezing again," he said.

"I don't know about that," said Dr. Walker. "I think it means snow."

As he spoke he walked to a window, drew aside the heavy, old-fashioned curtains, and looked out.

"Snowing hard," he said. "I thought the tail of that wind meant snow."

"Will it delay the trains?" said the mother, breathing close.

"We will hope not," said Dr. Harris.

Dr. Walker replaced the curtains and returned to the fire to warm his hands.

Mrs. Broke was no longer able to stay in the room. As she went out into the hall, and was in the act of shutting the library door cautiously behind her, she was met by the tragic face of the old butler.

"Any change, ma'am?" he said in a scarcely articulate voice.

"Practically none, I am afraid, Porson."

Broke was sitting in the darkest part of the hall. Some distance from him, in the middle of a large sofa before the fire, Lord Bosket was seated also. Broke was supporting his chin on his hands, and was staring into vacancy with a perplexed look on his face. Lord Bosket had his hands stuck in his pockets and his head lying back on the cushions, while his muddy breeches and boots were toasting at the wide hearth. Alternately he seemed to be shedding tears and to be imbibing whisky and water. The rest of the people had gone away.

Broke did not speak, nor at the approach of his wife did he lift his head.

"A damn nice Christmas for us," said Lord Bosket, with half a grunt and half a groan.

Mrs. Broke made an effort to speak reassuringly. Lord Bosket shook his head.

"I knew it was all up with 'em both as soon as I saw 'em go," he said. "I never saw such a toss in my life."

"They have sent for a surgeon from London. If she lives until he comes there is a chance that something may be done."

Lord Bosket refused to be comforted. He began again to shed tears softly.

All this time Broke had not moved, and he did not appear to have listened to a word that had been spoken.

The girls were hanging about in a corridor. They were still hatted and booted and in their habits. Their faces were scared, but unemotional, and one and all preserved the intense silence of their father. Jane still held the hat with the broken brim. They were like sheep huddling in a furrow waiting for the black storm to burst upon their heads that the winds have gathered. They hardly knew enough of life to be aware of the precise nature of the mysterious thing that was happening. They had been pushed to the extreme verge of their intelligence; beyond, into the immense and awful void of the unknown, they did not try to peer.

Once out of the room, Mrs. Broke could not rest until she was back in it. She returned to find that things had suffered no change. The doctors were standing near the fire conversing in undertones, exactly as when she had left them. With all the power of her mind she strove to resign herself to the tardy, uneventful passing of the minutes. The only respite to this dreadful inaction was when first one doctor, and then, perhaps, half an hour afterwards, the other, rose from his chair to take a glance at Joan. Once or twice Mrs. Broke drew aside the curtains to look at the falling snow. It was still being shaken out of a dense sky in silent, persistent flakes. Already the lawn was thickly covered, and the depth of the fall could be gauged by the layer that rested on the branches of a tree which pressed against the window.

The slow hours passed. Life remained in Joan, but not once could it be said to flicker back into a state of consciousness. After some three hours had followed the sending of the telegram, Dr. Walker lingered in one of his excursions to the side of the bed, and by a slight movement of the head was observed to summon Dr. Harris. For some time they stood together looking down upon it intently, and making slight, inaudible comments to one another. Afterwards they returned to the fire.

Although Mrs. Broke could learn nothing of what was in

their minds she hung upon the expression of their inscrutable faces. Feverishly as her eyes traversed them, they were a closed book which she could not read.

“No change?”

“No change,” they said.

“Do you think *now*——”

“The chances are now in her favour that she may hold out until he comes.”

Mrs. Broke then went to arrange for the surgeon to be met at Covenden station. Lord Bosket rose immediately to go himself.

After that half an hour passed in silence, which was only broken by the stertorous breathing of Joan. One of the doctors took out his watch.

“He should be here in twenty-five minutes if he caught the seven-twenty and the weather and the Christmas traffic have not delayed the train. He is being met, I hope?”

“My brother went half an hour ago.”

A muffled knock came to the library door, and the old butler crept in on tiptoe. He handed Dr. Walker a telegram.

“It is not to tell us he cannot come!” said Mrs. Broke, breaking for an instant the fine-drawn thread of her self-control.

“Arrive Cuttisham 8.31.—MacLachlan,” the telegram said.

A faint “Oh!” was wrung out of her.

She who for four mortal hours had suffered an almost unendurable suspense was now afflicted with a terrible excitement.

“If the train is punctual they must be almost here.”

She turned to look at the clock on the chimneypiece, having forgotten that she had stopped it hours ago.

In an attempt to put the slow passing of the seconds out of her mind she left the room again. She went out to the man who still cowered mute in the darkest part of the hall, and who in four hours had not once changed his posture.

“The surgeon will be here in a few minutes, Edmund. Here is his telegram.”

Abruptly, but without speaking, Broke rose to his feet in

a rather aimless manner, almost as if galvanized into life by the slip of pink paper in the hand of his wife ; and then as she returned to the library, he followed her. There was something in the act that resembled that of a man walking in his sleep.

When they entered the room together Mrs. Broke saw that both doctors were standing side by side and bending over the mattress. One was holding Joan's wrist ; the other, stooping over her, was watching her face with minute intensity.

"Mrs. Broke." She heard her name.

In much the same manner that the prisoner at the bar hears the foreman of the jury utter the sinister word "Guilty" did the mother hear her name pronounced. Her soul fell into a kind of stupefaction. She moved to the couch, Broke following mechanically, instinctively like a dumb animal. She did not dare to look at the impassive men before her, but forced herself to fix her eyes on the face of her eldest daughter. A scarcely perceptible tremor was emanating from it, hardly so much, perhaps, as the flickering of a candle in a draught for the fraction of a second before it flutters out. To know whether the sealed eyelids twitched or whether they were still was not possible, for she saw everything through a dancing red haze. The cold face, the colour of snow, seemed to be a little convulsed ; the chest sank. The fact slowly overspread her senses that the loud, stertorous breathing was no longer to be heard.

"Joan !" and then eagerly : "Joan, speak to me !"

She continued to look at the face with a far-off comprehension of the incomprehensible. Presently she drew her eyes away dully to confront the doctors. They had turned away. Broke alone was standing by her side. His face was grey. She placed her hand on his sleeve, a little authoritatively, and led him away a few paces in the manner that a mother leads a child.

At the far end of the room the door was seen to open. The old butler's hushed voice broke the silence.

"Sir Peter MacLachlan."

A thin, tall, sandy-haired man, with a pale red complexion peaked with the cold and empurpled round the nose and ears, came briskly out of the darkness beyond the lamps. He looked too young to bear so great a reputation. He was accompanied by an older, more conventional-looking man, who carried a small handbag.

Dr. Walker stepped forward to meet them.

"We are much obliged to you for coming, Sir Peter," he said, offering his hand to the youngish man with the sandy hair, "but I am sorry to say you are just a little too late."

CHAPTER XLII

AD GLORIAM DEI ET IN MEMORIAM BROKEÆ

ON Christmas morning a pilgrimage was made to the churchyard of Covenden to choose the last resting-place of Joan. It was in keeping with the new order of things, an indication of the spirit of the age, that Joan was not to repose in the company of her forebears in the church itself. It was believed that she was the first Broke of Covenden dying at home in all that long tally of eight hundred years who was not committed to the vaults of the sacred edifice. She was to lie in humbler fashion in the God's Acre under the common sky. It was in deference to the wish of her mother that her eldest daughter should open a new era in the history of her name.

The little church could not go on for ever with fresh tablets added generation after generation to its walls. The tombs beneath had long been groaning. Warriors and statesmen Brokes were there from the time of the Plantagenets. Simple rural Brokes were there as well, plain and pious countryfolk, whose only claim upon their race was that they supplied the links of its transmission. But Brokes illustrious and Brokes obscure—every wearer of that name was secure upon his return to whence he came of his niche in the sacred house that was dedicated to the glory of God and the house of Broke. "Ad gloriam Dei et in memoriam Brokeæ."

Joan was to lie in the open air she loved so well. It was not hers to repose cheek by jowl with her medieval forebear who lay with his lady by his side, clad in complete mail save for the lifted vizor that showed his face, with his sword

clasped to his breast in his iron fists, and his crossed feet resting on a faithful hound, emblem of loyalty—image of a Crusader, returned from the wars in Palestine. It was not hers to lie with her less martial ancestor of the age of Elizabeth who knelt to face his spouse in the attitude of prayer, with his sixteenth-century jerkin cut to simulate the hauberk of the knight his neighbour, although no more warlike accomplishment was his than a Bible on a pedestal. Nor was it hers to lie with her more fanciful kinsmen of the Georgian period who allowed a poetic licence to dictate the panoply of death; who sought therein to combine the Augustan age with that of the Second Stuart by placing periwigs upon their heads, buskins on their legs, and as a last embellishment laid over all the toga of the ancient senate house beside the Tiber.

Could Broke have consulted his own wishes, his eldest daughter would have lain with these. To his medieval mind the laws of sanitation made no appeal. In a matter of this sort common sense was for the common people. He would have been the last person in the world to allow it to take precedence of tradition and pride of kindred. He would have had science and the public weal yield humbly in all things to the illustrious dead. But that morning the bruised human father had not the physical power to carry his point. Mrs. Broke in the name of the twentieth century prevailed over the twelfth.

Therefore Broke, his wife, and the three children still left to them, set out on Christmas morning in the company of the head gardener to the little churchyard to choose six feet of sepulchre. Their road took them past the cottage inhabited by Billy's wife and her aunt. Mrs. Broke had had the consideration to have them informed already of the tragedy of the previous evening. The blinds of the cottage were pulled down, the door was shut, and there was not a sign of either of its occupants.

The churchyard, hanging on the face of the hill, sloped at an angle of thirty degrees. The small church itself seemed to rise sheer behind the gates. This, however, was an optical illusion, as it was separated from them by a moss-

grown path of considerable length. As the little procession slowly ascended it there could be heard those at worship within the sacred precincts, uplifting their voices to the strains of "Hark! the herald angels sing!" in recognition of the joyful character of the occasion.

The mournful little party had to pass the entrance porch. As they came near, the worm-eaten oak doors slowly opened to emit the louder notes of the organ, and the fervent rustic voices in a lustier strain. Two women were passing out of the church.

They came full upon the little company, which by now was level with the church door. One of these women was young, the other old. Both were draped heavily in mourning. They were clinging to the arms of each other, and one at least appeared to be completely overcome. Their faces struck out with the vivid pallor of the snow that pervaded the grass, the trees and the gravestones. Mrs. Broke stopped to detain them. And at the same instant she laid her hand on Broke's arm in a decisive manner, with an unmistakable determination to detain him also.

"This is Billy's wife, Edmund," she said, making the physical attempt to draw him towards the fragile creature who, with horror in her eyes, was clasping the arm of her aunt. But the peremptory solicitude of her tone went for nothing. Broke, without any hesitation, without so much as a glance at the two stricken women, firmly disengaged himself from the grasp of his wife, and passed on round the angle of the porch. With the same absence of hesitation his daughters followed. They had heard the words of their mother, but their gaze was riveted on the form and bearing of their father.

When Broke and his daughters had passed out of sight Miss Sparrow was able in a measure to suppress the emotion which had overwhelmed her. She made her usual curtsy and found the courage to speak.

"The music, ma'am, was too dreadful. I could not help thinking of you and what you must suffer this Christmas morning. It is a cruel, cruel Christmas for you!"

"I hope my message did not shock you too much."

"It was very kind, ma'am, and considerate."

All this time the girl had been looking at Mrs. Broke dumbly.

"How are you, dear Alice? You are wise to get as much of the pure out-of-doors air as you can."

Alice continued to look at her mother-in-law with unfaltering eyes.

"I have been thinking," she said in a deliberate voice, "that perhaps it is better that some one shall be there to meet him in case I am not."

"Who, my dear? And where?"

Mrs. Broke was disconcerted by the matter-of-fact tone, and all the more because for the moment she was at a loss to divine the meaning of the words.

"I mean my husband," said Alice, with a deliberation that gave Mrs. Broke a sensation of faintness. "His sister is there already, and he is going there, and I am going too."

Mrs. Broke recoiled from the calm voice. She turned to the aunt.

"You must really see that she takes more fresh air, Miss Sparrow."

"I would like to be buried here, if I may, in this sweet place," said Alice, "which is where he was born and in which he lived longer than anywhere else. I may, please, may I not?"

Mrs. Broke was too weak this morning to cope with these morbid fancies. Somewhat hastily she left aunt and niece and went round the church to rejoin Broke and her daughters. They were discovered in a secluded corner of the churchyard where, surrounded by bushy firs, a spot had been chosen for Joan's last resting-place.

CHAPTER XLIII

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

FROM that Christmas morning Mrs. Broke went every day to the cottage on the hill. As the time of her son's wife drew near she seemed to recognize by instinct rather than by the process of reason that the prospect of a new generation of their name was fraught with great issues. She had not told Broke as yet. Indeed, she hardly dared to do so in his present mood. The tragic death of Joan had appeared to harden rather than to relax his heart. He was of the type that adversity embitters.

At this time, too, one momentous issue filled the mind of every person in the country: the war with the Boers in South Africa. The whole nation was deeply humiliated by a succession of reverses that had overtaken the British arms. Men of all classes, and of an age long past that usually associated with active service, were volunteering for the Front. Among these patriots were Broke and Lord Bosket. They had placed their services at the disposal of their country. But their country, alas! had shown no disposition to accept them.

In the stress of this war fever the possibility of disaster was seldom absent from the mind of Mrs. Broke. For one thing she was haunted by the obsession that had taken such a terrible hold of the young wife. Her thoughts strayed continually to the fragile creature at the cottage, and whenever they did so she could not dissemble her fears. Alice's conviction that something was about to overtake or had overtaken Billy grew more intense as the days passed. Indeed, it became more powerful day by day, so that the

nearer her ordeal approached the less seemed to grow her desire to survive it.

One morning, in the early days of the New Year, Mrs. Broke was hastily scanning the newspaper after breakfast, and, as usual with them of late, her eyes turned first to the grimmest of all the grim columns in it : that which set forth the latest list of casualties to hand from the seat of war. Many dim and aching eyes were to look upon it that morning, as every morning, but none more unhappily than those of this bereaved woman in the desolation of her heart. In a few incredibly short months three children had become lost to her. And such was the state of despair in which she was now sunk, that she, too, was haunted with the prepossession that the sum of her misfortunes was not yet complete. She had the conviction—such was the abyss in which that bruised spirit was sunk—that the cup of her sorrows was not yet full. As long as her son lived the hope remained, however faint, that one day he might be given back to her. Circumstance, however, had merely to write his name in that dread list in the morning paper to destroy that hope once and for all.

This morning of mid-January she turned as usual to the newspaper with shuddering eyes. It was a refinement of torture that although she was denied the solace of hope the pangs of suspense were not on that account allayed. Circumstance had the ingenuity of a Grand Inquisitor in the bestowal of pain. And this morning she had not read far down the page when her eyes fell on an item which at first seemed to wear an air of only distant significance. It said : “Rhodesian Light Horse, No. 3013, Sergeant W. Broek (?), killed in action near Schnadhorst’s Spruit, January 2.”

The number was the first thing that caught her attention. It corresponded with the one she carried in her brain. From that she went on to the other particulars as set forth, and all too soon her last doubt had passed. Even the misspelt and queried name became a part of a harmonious whole.

Perhaps the fact that struck her most forcibly at first was a certain irony in the terms of the announcement. Her

capacity for suffering was already past its highest. As one stricken with a mortal disease may not have the same susceptibility to pain as a perfectly normal and healthy frame, so Mrs. Broke had already gone beyond the stage of her keenest anguish. Her son was dead ; but the calamity had been foreseen. It was no more than another link in the chain of events that was pressing out the lives of them all. The last of an ancient line, about whom had gathered centuries of tradition, had perished as an obscure common soldier in a skirmish in a distant land.

She had not the courage to go to Broke and tell him then. So greatly had he been tried already that, as was the case with her, the capacity for suffering had perhaps been blunted. But in any case it seemed to verge on the inhuman to thrust upon him that which for the moment had been withheld.

A little afterwards, when the nature of the tidings assumed a more definite outline in her mind, the four walls of the room in which she sat began to contract. Her senses were still sufficiently normal to be aware that this was the merest illusion ; that fact notwithstanding, she rose and went to another room. In a little while the effect was repeated there. A craving came upon her to go out of doors. There was something in her that demanded a freer, more spacious air.

Once out of doors she was invaded by the necessity of making her way to the cottage at once. The future might depend entirely upon that. It was absolutely essential that the news contained in the morning's newspaper should not come to the notice of the wife. It called for no common hardihood to go to that place there and then, but once again a bitter need had made her strong.

When she came to the cottage door, Dr. Walker was in the act of leaving.

" Ha ! Mrs. Broke, I wanted to see you. I have ordered her to keep her bed. I think it wise ; and I must be sent for at the first moment."

" Have you an idea when ? "

" This evening most probably."

Mrs. Broke then put a tentative question to the doctor as

to whether he had seen anything of a special interest in that morning's newspaper. When he said he had not she drew the sheet containing the announcement out of her cloak, and asked him to read the line on which her finger was placed.

"You don't mean to say that is our poor boy?"

"Yes," she said in a firm voice.

There was a moment in which the doctor betrayed some emotion. He then peered hard at Mrs Broke. Her fortitude struck him as very remarkable.

"I feel for you very much," he said in an odd quavering tone. "You have had a lot of bad luck lately. And the poor father? He must be dreadfully cut up."

"He does not know yet."

"Keep it from him as long as you can. And, of course, the child upstairs——"

"Indeed, yes."

"Of course, it goes without saying as far as you are concerned. But the question arises whether we shall be able to keep her mind quiet. She appears in a sense to know already."

"Is it advisable to tell Miss Sparrow?"

"She seems a sensible old woman. As for the nurse, she is a veritable dragon of prudence in whom you will find a great ally."

Mrs. Broke passed into the cottage to find the veritable dragon of prudence filling an india-rubber hot-water bottle from a kettle on the hob. She was an apple-cheeked creature of the country-side, severe of years and mien, a bedroom autocrat accustomed by divine right of calling to exact the obedience and the homage of all the world.

"Good morning, ma'am," she said, without a pause in the operation she was conducting.

"Good morning. May I go upstairs?"

"No, ma'am, she is too excited. I would not have let her aunt go up, only she is so used to having her about her that it might have unsettled her more if she had not been able to see her."

"How is she this morning?"

"I am not pleased with her, ma'am. She is feverish. And

she has taken the notion that her husband is dead, and that she is going to die too ; although, for that matter, they are often taken that way. But this notion about Mr. William looks like making it very awkward, ma'am. She is firmly convinced he is dead, although it is all a flam, no more than fancy."

"On the contrary, I am afraid it is true," said Mrs. Broke in a low voice.

The nurse nearly allowed the hot-water bottle to fall from her hand.

"You can't mean to say, ma'am, that our poor Mr. William——?"

"The news is in this morning's paper."

The face of the nurse was a picture of blank consternation.

"I am sure, ma'am, I feel for you all. It is terrible hard for you and Mr. Broke, and so soon after poor Miss Joan. And, poor lamb, she is right after all. We might well not be able to get it out of her head. It is just like poor Mrs. Pearson, who knew her husband was drowned hours before they brought home the body. And here's her auntie and I been a-scolding of her!"

At this moment Miss Sparrow was seen descending the stairs, bearing an untasted cup of milk in her hand. At the sight of Mrs. Broke she stopped half-way in her descent to drop her inevitable curtsey. Custom had rendered it so precise that she was able to perform the feat without spilling a drop of the milk she carried.

Mrs. Broke greeted the old woman with the marked kindness of tone she never failed to use to her.

"I have bad news for you, Miss Sparrow," she said a little while afterwards, "but I know you have great courage."

"I will try to have, ma'am," said the old woman simply.

"Our fears are realized. My son has been killed in South Africa."

The old woman stood perfectly still, with her wizened hands crossed on her flat bosom.

"Two in a fortnight, ma'am. I don't know, ma'am, how your mind can bear it. My heart bleeds for you."

There was an extraordinary pity in the tone which touched

the mother. Such a solicitude directed to herself she found to be infinitely more unnerving than an outburst of woe.

"It is hard to say 'Thy will be done,'" said the old woman in a contained voice.

For some little time she seemed either unwilling or unable to apply to her own life the bearing the news must have upon it. But at last she broke forth quite suddenly, in a voice that was like the squeal of a hare that has been hit :

"My Alice ! My Alice !"

The idea appeared to have struck her with all its force for the first time.

"The news must be kept from her at all costs," said Mrs. Broke, shaken with pity.

"Not for long, ma'am, not for long. Not for more than a day or two at the most. Already she knows in her heart."

"I fear she does, poor child."

Silence came between them again until the old woman spoke once more, this time with a brevity that transfixed the listener.

"Sentence of death, ma'am, for Alice !"

Mrs. Broke's conviction of the truth of this statement was so clear that she was not able to make an attempt to console the poor old creature.

"She is my all, ma'am," said the old woman desolately. "She is all I have got in the world. I shall not be able to bear the loneliness when she is taken."

The old woman pressed her fingers, coarsened with a lifetime of toil, against her flat chest. Her shrivelled frame was erect, and as gaunt in its rigidity as the arm of a wind-mill.

"It seems hard," she went on, with a total absence of passion, "that the poor young gentleman should have been killed just when that great fortune had come to him. If it had come to him a little sooner Alice would have been saved. He would not have needed to leave her then, and she would not have died. But 'God moves in a mysterious way,' as the beautiful hymn tells us. I am an old woman, ma'am, but I have always noticed that things fall out in a way you cannot comprehend. A little bit here and a little bit there and all

would have been changed. I suppose if we always knew what God was going to do we should presume upon our knowledge. If that money had come just a short month or two sooner two beautiful lives would not have been sacrificed, and you and me, ma'am, and the poor father and those poor dear sisters would not be feeling that the light of their lives had gone out."

"It is to teach us poor women the gospel of patience."

"There are times, ma'am, when it almost seems that you cannot be patient any more."

"If ever women cease to be patient there will perish the only hope remaining to the world," said Mrs. Broke, speaking for her sex with the mournful conviction of a seer.

A merciful silence came between them again. Speech lost its adequacy. In their ways of life they diverged as widely as two people could. Their lots had not been cast in the same plane. But they were a pair of women who felt the pinch of life in a precisely similar fashion. As one individual they moved through the same abysmal darkness.

In this nadir of the spirit in which they were lost the cottage door was opened, and the figure of a young girl was seen upon the threshold. She entered the little room with a quiet, assured step. Suddenly she stopped, and a harrowing irresolution seemed to invade her. At the sight of one seated in that room she drew back abruptly as though in the grip of some powerful reaction. Step by step the small figure retreated backwards to the cottage door.

Mrs. Broke, who was seated with her face towards the door, had not taken her eyes from those of the old woman when the first sound of the lifted latch had crept upon her ears. It was not at first that the indecision of the person who had entered was rendered to her absent senses, which were so far away from the trite facts that were being evolved out of the present. No sooner was she aware, however, of a third person in that little room, than she looked up to learn who it might be. It was Delia.

The first shock of recognition past, mother and daughter found themselves peering at one another as through the mists of the void that had opened between their lives. They

had something of that illusion which the climbers of the Brocken experience when they behold their own shadows reflected on the opposite mountain. Mother and daughter were closely akin, but as they gazed at one another now an immutable law of their being appeared to hold them forever apart.

This feeling, however, passed almost immediately from Mrs. Broke's mind. It was there but an instant: No sooner had the pale, proud image of her youngest-born been cut into her brain, than she rose to her feet with a cry.

"Delia!"

There was no room in her already submerged heart for the question of a loyal attitude to Broke to enter it. All things were merged in the cry of her maternity.

"Delia!" she cried, and ran to her daughter with outstretched arms.

Not a nerve in Delia responded to the call.

"Delia!" she cried for the third time.

Delia did not heed her mother's cry. Her chin was raised and her vivid eyes were looking steadily past her to the wall beyond.

"Have you nothing to say to me?" said her mother faintly. "Have you no mercy to show me? If you have not I do not think I can bear it."

Deep down in her consciousness there was the echo of the speech her brother had reported as having fallen from the girl's lips in relation to the conduct of her father. "God may forgive him, but I never will!" These Brokes were not light of utterance. It had seemed to her at the time, and now the fact returned upon her with a force that made her brain reel, that for one of their women to make use of such a speech implied not only a full conception of all that it meant but also the implacable power of will to make good the cruel words.

"You cannot mean it, Delia!"

The voice of the mother touched no chord in the daughter.

"You cannot mean it, Delia. I had neither art nor part in your father's act."

She hardly knew the words she used. And in any case the

admission was wrung out of the very depths of that faithful spirit.

For the fraction of an instant Delia closed her eyes as if unable to bear the sight of her mother's face. But in the next instant she had answered her in the melancholy voice of a judge.

"You suppressed a letter."

"I confess it. But it was to protect you—it was to protect you all. The act may have been wrong, but I say before God that my motive was not unworthy. Whether I acted rightly or wrongly, that you should judge me is more than I can bear. Have you no pity for the mother who has never had a thought apart from the welfare of you all?"

"You had no pity for another," said Delia coldly. "He was poor and he was defenceless. I do not think you deserve to be forgiven."

The mercilessness of the words helped the mother to regain her self-control. With it returned her force of will. An inflexible determination to prevail was born in her. She gripped her daughter by the arm. The furrowed face was moulded in stern lines.

"I am innocent, Delia, you shall do me that justice. I am innocent before God."

Stitch by stitch the garb of convention in which civilization demands that a woman of the world shall clothe herself was being torn away. Her daughter gazed pitilessly at the spectacle.

"You had no mercy."

"No—perhaps. But you—you shall extend it to *me*."

She gripped the unresisting wrists so tightly that the imprint of her fingers was visible. A slow and cruel smile began to creep out of Delia's eyes, the peculiar weapon of one woman when she is about to slay another. It seemed to open a vein in the victim.

"You force me to my knees," she gasped.

The last stitch was torn away. But not for an instant did her daughter avert the gaze that was killing her with its scorn.

"I hold your guilt to be the equal of my father's," said the melancholy voice of justice.

"You shall not, O my God!"

Their implacable eyes contended. As when two blades equally choice of temper are crossed in a duel to the death, it is left to the stronger cause to win the mastery, it was with this knowledge that these unhappy women now entered the arena. Let truth be the arbiter, let right prevail.

"Delia, I challenge you to prove that I have not spoken the truth."

"You suppressed a letter."

"It was—it was for the sake of you all."

"You took me away that afternoon."

"I did not know what was about to happen."

"You had not any kind of foreknowledge—none whatever, mother?"

"None."

"You swear it before God?"

"Before God I swear it!"

The naked and bleeding woman, the woman of ineffable wisdom and mastery, the woman of unconquerable will, covered her face with her hands in a spasm of very shame. She was lying. She was lying to save her reason.

It had been too much to undergo this inquisition at the hands of one she called daughter. But all their lives these creatures had never learned to trust her. She had never taken the trouble to interpret herself in lucid terms to these women, in terms that could place all their doubts concerning her at rest.

"You will believe me, Delia," said her mother in a voice that had long ceased to be her own.

The barrier of a lifelong reserve was broken down.

"You shall believe me, Delia."

Again she gripped the limp wrists, and with a strength that seemed to herself so great as to be capable of breaking them in two. She searched wildly the dismal but unresponsive eyes to find a trace of that mercy whose denial could only mean death.

"You will believe me," she repeated again and yet again.

A look of harrowing conflict came into the face of Delia. Suddenly she began to rake the face of her mother with the awful candour of her eyes. Not a corner in which deception might cower did she leave untraversed. The dismal eyes explored abysses in that face which never before had had an existence for them. Even in the act she grew conscious that this was a wonderful face into which she was looking. But the cruel task must be carried through. The grey hairs of her mother, the hollow cheeks, the sunken eyes, the wildly trembling lips were alike traversed by an inquisition dreadful, inexorable.

The victim did not quail. Her will enabled her to stand there to meet those vivisecting eyes, in despite of the fact that her conscience had declared that she must share the guilt of Broke. And very, very slowly, by sheer iron resolve she forced her daughter to concede that she had spoken the truth.

The breath of both issued from their tightening throats in the hard and audible manner of Joan's when she lay dying. Delia then proceeded very slowly and gravely to press her lips upon her mother's forehead.

"I believe you, mother," she said, taking the broken woman in her arms.

CHAPTER XLIV

A DWELLER ON THE MOUNTAINS

MRS. BROKE and her recovered daughter sat a long hour together. Delia was spending a few days at Cuttisham with her husband at the house of his father. That morning she had seen the announcement in the newspaper of her brother's death. Like her mother, she had been able to identify him by the number attached to the misspelt name. Before he went to South Africa she had given him her promise that she would keep in touch with his wife. Accordingly she had corresponded with her regularly ; and now, under the stress of this tragic event, she had been able, not without a struggle, to overcome the repugnance she had to setting foot again on her father's property. She had yielded to the impulse to make a pilgrimage to the one for whom her brother had forfeited everything, even life itself. Her promise became a sacred duty now that he was dead.

She had heard of Joan's death also through the newspaper. But she had not yielded to her intense desire to attend her sister's burial, well knowing that her presence at the graveside would cause great unhappiness to every member of her family.

Once the barrier was broken down between mother and daughter their re-established intercourse was curiously intimate. Now that Delia had accepted the fact of her mother's innocence, for the first time in her life she took her completely into her confidence. There could be no half-measures now with Delia. It was the signal honesty of her nature either to reject or to accept. Once the barrier was

down the broken woman was received in the arms of her daughter as a parent fainting under the relentless strokes of fate.

“Do my sisters know about Billy?” she asked, after they had talked some little time together.

“No, alas! nor your poor father.”

“They must be almost crushed, poor things. How lost, how inexpressibly lost they must feel without Joan; and then Hat too is gone away. What dear happy days we all had together once. One short year ago we little guessed what life had in store. How much has happened to us since then. I at least am not the shy little timid girl I was in those days, that now seem ages and ages away. I am very greatly changed, and you too, dear mother, seem very much changed. Perhaps it is that one’s eyes are not the same. But what dear, dear days they were! Oh those sweet winter mornings when we all used to go hunting with poor dear Uncle Charles!”

“And your poor dear father,” Mrs. Broke interposed softly.

“I remember Joan was always our leader—dear, high-hearted fearless Joan. What a great soldier she would have been!”

“It has made your father very aged,” said her mother, with a wistfulness that was almost timid. “Perhaps you will hardly guess how tenderly he has loved you all. Perhaps you will hardly guess what an inveterate pride he has had in you. You have meant so much to him. I believe he would have laid down his life cheerfully rather than a hair of your heads should suffer. He will never be the same man again. I think it would shock you to see how white he has grown.”

Delia did not respond.

“It is hard,” said Mrs. Broke, with a kind of sunken eagerness in her deeply lined face, “for us sometimes to understand how men look at things. I think, my dear one, we ought not to judge them, because of the difference in our natures.”

“They judge us.”

There was something in the nature of the words that made the blood run cold in the veins of the mother.

"I do not think they judge us harshly," she said.

"They commit crimes against us in the name of justice."

"And if they do, my dear one, have they not the greater need of our forgiveness?"

Delia's eyes were like stone.

"Alas, alas, my dear one!"

"Should they not seek a true conception of the quality of justice before they inflict it upon us?"

"Nothing, my dear one, must ever interfere with the woman's prerogative of seeking the true conception of forgiveness."

"Let men win it for themselves, mother, before they seek it in us."

"Alas, there spoke a Broke."

The reproach was wrung out of the unhappy wife and mother. The voice of the medievalist was heard too clearly in his daughter's words.

"How can there be a hope for the world, my dear one, so long as we perpetuate the evil there is in it?"

"Does not man mould us to his will? Is it not through him, and only him, that progress and enlightenment can come?"

"Yes and no," said Mrs. Broke, taking Delia's hands in each of her own. Her instant anxiety seemed to mark the effect of every word upon that tortured face. "We must help each other. The strong helping the weak, the weak helping the strong."

"Is not that what women have tried to comfort themselves with from the beginning of time? But the strong do not seem to grow less brutal."

"Oh, my poor child!"

"Oh, I know, I know! There is a poison in my veins."

The slender body rocked to and fro.

"Is there no strength within you, my dear one?"

"The stealthy, subtle poison taints me. I am powerless against it."

"Much may be done by prayer."

"Alas!"

"You must never forget that we women, we wives and mothers, are chained to the oar of the galley. That fact, my dear one, must teach us how to pray."

"Oh, I know, I know!"

"We are brought into this world in a state of captivity and subjection. We cannot put off our fetters, we cannot call ourselves free."

"If I am chained to the galley the fetters are of silk that bind me."

"They are fetters, none the less. And if the bonds are of silk they are so much the harder to break."

For the first time the look of pain seemed to lift slightly in Delia's eyes. Her mother was looking at her all the time with furtive anxiousness.

"Think of your husband," she said, "and then tell me that your unhappy father is forgiven."

Delia closed her eyes mutely.

"You would be shocked to know how broken and aged he is."

Delia did not speak.

"Do you think if your husband——"

The question, framed with a slow precision, sank into the young wife. She answered very calmly:

"There is nothing I would not do at his command."

"The hour will soon be here when I shall hold you to that," said the mother, with almost an air of victory.

A look of horror crossed Delia's face.

"If you ask that of him, mother, you will ask what I dare not."

"Then, my dear one, I have formed a nobler estimate of your husband than has his wife."

Delia shuddered.

"If I were to suffer a repulse from *him* I think it would kill me," she said.

"Do not fear. I have come to see he is one who dwells upon the mountains. If on my knees, humbly, in the name of my kind, I crave this boon, he will grant it."

The furrows shone livid in that grey face. Again Delia closed her eyes.

"I implore you, mother, not to incur so great a danger. A repulse would kill us both."

"There will be no repulse. They who dwell upon the mountains do not spurn those whom Fate casts at their feet. He will not deny me."

"But a crime was committed against him. The man does not breathe who could forgive it."

By now the look of pain in the eyes of Delia had given place to pity. It seemed to her that suffering was weakening her mother's mind a little. Her own implacable heart was the only gauge she had for that of others. Had she stood in the room of her husband, and that appeal had been made, she knew that she must have repulsed it, perhaps with contumely. Nature would compel him so to act, however he might strive to rise beyond her. Delia, too, had a desire to achieve this godlike magnanimity, but it had already been revealed to her how feeble is the human heart when in the grip of those superhuman forces that make for destiny.

"I beseech you, dear mother, I implore you to be forewarned. Your request must fail should you dare to make it, and failing must recoil upon you."

Delia spoke with the sombre fervour of the prophetess. But her almost wild solicitude was met by the ghost of that old indomitable smile.

"I do not fear, my dear one," said Mrs. Broke; and now something of the old victorious suavity seemed to be returning, as in the very throes of death a certain placidity of the spirit may arise. "I do not fear. And when my request has been made and has been granted, I shall ask you to fulfil your part as truly as he will have fulfilled his."

Delia clasped her bosom. Her eyes were darkening. The furrows still shone livid in her mother's face, but now it had a look of victory.

"I do not fear," it said as staunchly as her lips could have framed the words.

CHAPTER XLV

THE LAST BATTLE

MRS. BROKE left the cottage a short time afterwards to attend the family luncheon. Delia, apprised of what was shortly to occur, had declared her intention of staying at the cottage until the more immediate crisis, at least, was past.

At the luncheon table were seated Broke and the three daughters remaining to him. As yet none of them knew of Billy's death. The problem immediately before Mrs. Broke was the most fitting manner of telling them. The task must prove very painful; and nothing but the inexorable demand made by events so rapidly precipitating would have induced her to undertake it in her present state. Even as she sat at the table, with a mind completely obsessed by the subject, she came to the conclusion that the actual need only applied to Broke himself, and that for the time being her daughters could be left in a merciful ignorance.

No sooner was the meal at an end than she asked Broke to grant her a few minutes of his time.

"I will not detain you, Edmund, more than a minute or two."

Her tone was intended to imply that she wished to speak with him on some simple matter. Accordingly they entered the library together. Their feet once again on that old battleground, where so much of their blood had been shed already, she did not fence. She had no longer the power. She must speak at once, else her strength would go. No longer was she the perfectly balanced woman of affairs whose emotional nature was in entire subordination to the

will. To look at Broke as he stood before her now, and to recall what he was a few brief months ago, was to be conscious that she was gazing upon the wraith that was herself.

“I will be brief, Edmund. Billy is dead.”

The white-headed man remained upright and serene, except for the hardly perceptible stoop that had come so lately in the nobly-spreading shoulders. There was hardly a sign of perception in the seared face.

“He died in the service of his country. He was killed in action on the second of January.”

Broke made no reply.

“He is the last of you. Your name dies with him ; and I do not think there is a Broke of you all who could have asked that it should end more fittingly. The last of you gave his life for his country. That is an ample requiem, even for such a race as yours.”

He remained before her upright and unspeaking. She gazed upon him with something of an approach to her old baffling, ironical smile.

“He was your son ; also he was the last of your name.”

Each word was charged with a relentless precision. They might have had bitterness had they been less impartial, they might have had passion had they been less coldly wrought.

“Have you not a word to say, Edmund ? Have you not a word in which you can answer me ? ”

His answer was a walk of a mechanical weariness out of the room.

The remainder of the winter's afternoon had for her the strange concentration, the indescribable mental density of the last hours of Joan's life on Christmas Eve. There was nothing she could do. She could neither lie nor sit ; she could hardly stand still ; she had only just resolution enough to resist the craving to be perpetually walking about. She could not write nor could she read. She went to her bedroom to attempt sleep. But there was no chance of that.

Throughout those intolerable hours the need haunted her of keeping a full and complete control of the will. If once she let go of that, if once it faltered in this supreme

crisis, or fell short by one iota of the whole force of its mature strength, she knew that she was destroyed. Now that, after all these long years, the time was at hand when the very highest demands were to be made upon the endurance of one old and poor woman, she was suddenly possessed by a harrowing doubt of its adequacy.

Already she was cruelly shaken. That morning at the cottage she had had an evidence that the first bulwark of the citadel, the barrier of her reticence, had been unhinged, had been thrown down. A breach was left gaping in her defences and it must be repaired. All that afternoon she bent her energies upon the task. Not a fissure must be in her armour through which a stray shaft might pierce to the consecrated thing that lay beyond. For in spite of all that had gone before she knew that the really decisive conflict was yet to be.

If she entered upon that ordeal with one weak spot in her soul some pitiless shaft would seek it out, and she, weak woman, would be overthrown. Hour by hour she laboured to repair the breach in her defences caused by the threatened breakdown of her will. As one possessed she laboured. With a contained fury she fought to keep a hold of that magic talisman the loss of which meant total destruction for her and hers.

The encounter with her youngest daughter had stripped her bare. A grisly fear that she dare not face was now at the back of her mind. Now that the clothes of her civilization had been torn from her shuddering limbs, might not reason itself be torn away also? Pray Heaven that would be left to her! There was the work of a Titan before her. One tremor of weakness, and all would be lost. Let a nerve in that overdriven brain fail to respond to the call, and the Giant with whom she had to grapple would fling her to the dust and press her life out with his heels.

The task that confronted her must have daunted all save the indomitable.

If she yielded her life in the attempt this Amazon among women had made the pledge to her maternal spirit that Broke should admit his son and daughter back into his

heart. Alone and unaided she must fight that grim feudal monster. It had come at last, as all along it had threatened to do, to a question of sheer physical power.

In her desire to maintain her strength for the work before it, she turned to the medicine chest, where a nature more emotional would have had recourse to prayer. Afterwards she tried to surrender herself to the period of inaction that was now intervening, the time of comparative peace before the great and final conflict. She changed her morning dress and went down to afternoon tea in the drawing-room. Mercifully she was allowed to take it alone. There were no callers; the girls were not about; and Broke had a masculine scorn of such an effeminate beverage.

She took up a novel of Tolstoy's in French and tried to read portions chosen at random. She found she could not. Then she opened other books taken haphazard, bearing an acute relation to life and throwing sidelights upon it. Her success with these was no greater.

Between six and seven o'clock her own maid, who had spent the afternoon in doing duty at the cottage, appeared in the drawing-room in her cloak and hat.

"Miss Delia sent me to tell you, ma'am, that the doctor has been sent for."

"Thank you, Morton," said Mrs. Broke, rising and laying down her book. "Will you please fetch me some things; and will you also inquire whether Mr. Broke is in the library?"

"Mr. Broke is in the library, ma'am," said the maid, returning a little afterwards.

As the maid helped her into her cloak Mrs. Broke said: "You must eat some food, and go back to the cottage as soon as you can."

She then went to the library.

Broke was seated at a table writing letters. As she entered the room he looked up and paused to bite his pen vaguely, as though something of importance had passed out of his mind. He was about to resume without speaking when she said:

"I am sorry to interrupt you, Edmund, but I would ask for a minute or two of your attention."

He laid down his pen and rose from his chair in a fashion of mechanical weariness. As he did so she took care that the road to the door was barred effectually by her sombrely spreading presence.

"I give you my promise, Edmund, that this is the last occasion I shall make a reference to a distressing subject. On that ground I ask you to give a patient hearing to what I have to say to you."

He stood without one evidence of life in his face. The tired expression seemed to deepen, but he did not answer her.

"There is one thing you must know. It is this——"

He made a sudden attempt to get past her to the door. She stepped in front of him and held him with two cold but firm hands on the breast of his coat.

"It is not for you and me to descend to the merely futile, Edmund," she said in a voice that had a kind of strangled agony. "What I have to say is this: they have just sent to tell me that the wife of your son lies at the cottage on the hill with child. And I hasten to inform you of this fact because I conceive it to be my duty. You are the one person whom it more immediately concerns. Billy is dead, but you will recognize that, after all, your name may not be extinct. I now ask that you come with me to the cottage to learn the fate that is reserved for that which is more to you than anything else in the world."

These inflexible words were rendered passionlessly, but as they were spoken she never took her eyes from those of the man before her. But his own were averted. He still stood motionless and erect, save where the massive shoulders were bowed a little as by a succession of loads that had proved too heavy for them to bear.

"You cannot remain insensible to all that this fact means. A son may be born to your house to-night, and in that event the loyalty to the name you bear will force you to acknowledge it. The very pride of race that has brought you to this pass will compel you to do that."

She tried to peer into the averted eyes.

"Leaving mere human feeling out of the case," she went on in a voice in which the note of emotion had been sup-

pressed rigorously, "let us put the matter on the higher plane of an impersonal practical wisdom. Do you not see that if that one event happens you will be compelled to submit? Would it not be more politic, do you not think, to accept the inevitable before you are brought to your knees? Come with me now to the cottage. I ask it in the name of yourself."

No sound interrupted the long minute of silence that fell between man and wife. Mrs. Broke's tone, when next she spoke, had acquired not only pity but also a note of irony.

"Unhappy man," she said mournfully, "can you not see how feeble is your own strength when you oppose it to Fate? Do you suppose you are some mythical personage able to impose your will upon destiny? To the tradespeople of Cuttisham you are the squire of Covenden; to your friends and neighbours you are a person of unimpeachable respectability; you are a symbol of aristocracy in the conventional sense; but what, pray, do you suppose you stand for in the sight of Heaven? If there is still a sense of proportion remaining in you, exercise it, I implore you. Exercise it while there is yet time. Before this night is over I believe that the power of free will may no longer be yours."

Broke remained a statue. Not even words of mockery such as these could pierce him. The unhappy woman, knowing this was their final conflict, continued to wage battle. Her sick heart told her it was already lost, but she must fight on. From mockery and derision she passed to all the other devices of perfervid appeal. She urged her cause with a force and a power which proved that in this final extremity her mind retained its strength undaunted and to the full. But from first to last Broke was as a rock. No word escaped his lips. The hue of death was upon his face, the inanimation of it was in his heart.

However, even to the last her supreme qualities did not desert her. Like the staunchest of her race, she did not know when to give in. She struggled on sickly, blindly, with a dogged valour, long after her aim had lost its certainty. The inevitable loomed ahead, a dark and grisly bulk, but to submit to it was impossible so long as there

was any strength left in her. And when utterly spent, when sobbing for breath, when despised and broken at last, she knew that the limitations of the flesh were about to conquer her, she said finally, with hardly the same degree of control in her voice, and with something rather overwrought in her manner :

“ Edmund, there is one word more. If a son is born to your house this evening I would have you remember that he inherits a fortune of some two hundred and seventy thousand pounds. Do not forget that the will of old Mr. Breffit is made in his favour. And I ask, are you so blinded by arrogance that you do not discern by the light of that circumstance that Heaven itself has intervened in your affairs? That money will save your house from ruin, and in the event of a man-child being given to it to-night, will secure its prosperity through generations yet unborn.

“ For the last time I beseech you to come with me to the cottage now. Accept the wretched creature you have spurned so cruelly. Put away your blindness, Edmund, and forgive your son this fortnight slain. And there is that other child, an outcast from your heart, whom you will be compelled to reinstate. Do these things of your own free will. Do not wait until you become the plaything and the sport of Heaven. Let only another day go by, and you will be a lost soul. I speak for the last time, Edmund ; I can speak no more.”

The unhappy wife and mother ended this strange speech with flushed cheeks and many signs of purely physical distress. She trembled violently ; there was a curious tightening of the breast and throat ; her breath came in short, thick, gasping sobs ; her whole being seemed to be shattered. Again she tried to snatch a glimpse of that averted face. For all that she could read she might as well have been smitten with blindness.

Withdrawing her eyes, she went out of the room without saying anything more. She set out for the cottage with her insurgent thoughts now a nightmare that made a horror in her brain. It was a very dark night. There was a wet wind in it that now and then carried a thin spatter of rain.

It was very mild for the time of year. She walked fast and felt a sensation of physical relief when an occasional spray of rain was dashed in her face. It was burning with such intensity that when these tears out of heaven were flung upon it, an effect was made in her overwrought mind of water hissing on a white-hot surface.

In her heart was the clear conviction of failure, and something worse. She had staked her all; it had been swept away; and she was totally bankrupt. All she had had of will, of mother-wit, of capacity for suffering, had been matched against the unreason of this man, and it had treated them as nought. All hope was gone. Nothing was remaining now for him, nor for herself.

As she walked at a furious pace to the cottage, with the gushes of rain bringing to her the only kind of relief that was possible now, the haunted woman saw receding backwards in front of her into the black wall of the night step by step as she moved towards it, a huge ungainly shape. Once before, and for an instant only, had she caught a glimpse of this hideous phantom. It was in the night that followed her interview with her husband after her daughter's flight. This evening, however, the horror was more vivid. With jaunty and spasmodic gyrations it backed before her into the darkness, receding step by step as she pressed on and on. But odd and misshapen as was this mocking shape, there was something about it that made her think only of one. And once or twice as it emerged for a moment visible out of a wrack of fast-flying clouds and wind-shaken trees, she strained to see its face. It was grinning at her in the guise of a beast's, but the face was unmistakable.

Her soul grew faint when she saw it first. She shut her eyes, and reopened them to find that the inhuman face was again blotted out by the clouds and the trees. But at the end of the avenue, in a short interval of pasture, it was there again. It was merged almost immediately in the wall of a farm building. Suddenly, rounding a corner, the illuminated white blind of a farm labourer's cottage flashed into view. With a piercing sense of relief she knocked at the door and was able to borrow a lantern.

With that to bear her on her way the monster grew less visible, but nothing could disperse it altogether. She had waked to a discovery. It seemed to her now that she had lain these many years in the bosom of a wild beast formed ironically in the image of a Christian Englishman. The knowledge made her reel and almost cry aloud to the wind in agony.

The horror in her brain had already caused one fact to stand out very clear. It was one that she had foreseen when she entered upon that last interview. But now the realization of it was creeping through her veins with the deadly stealth of a drug. It was convulsing her heart. They could be man and wife no more.

In all that long term of their conjugal intercourse this was the first breach. Such a pair of temperate and eminently sane persons had known how to exalt the business of living together into a symphony of companionship. Their good breeding had enabled them to draw the nicest distinctions in the art of give-and-take. As far as it is given to one human being to interpret another human being, Broke and his wife had known how to do it. They had been very much to one another. They had lived in the paradise of a very perfect harmony. As she walked, however, in this gross darkness, the thirty-years wife of his bosom saw all that was past. This exquisite communion had been wrenched asunder. The same perfect loyalty could never be again. It would be out of the question to yield that fidelity to one who had become so peremptorily embodied in her mind as nothing less than a devil. A grisly accident had pulled aside the veil. For thirty years, incredible as the fact might seem, she had been deceived. She would be deceived no more. And yet she might have gone to her grave in this deception had not a sardonic impulse overcome High Heaven.

CHAPTER XLVI

AT THE COTTAGE ON THE HILL

IT was a relief to the poor woman to reach the cottage. Here was surcease for a time from the pangs her outraged instincts were wreaking upon her. The solace it afforded was scanty indeed, but anything was to be welcomed rather than she should be cast solitary upon the mercy of the night. There was human companionship at least in the little place ; also there were new and strange excitements to apply their sedatives. What was about to occur presently might prove unendurable too, but any diversion of her sufferings brought relief of a kind.

Dr. Walker had arrived already. He was as gruff as usual and as grimly cheerful. He received Mrs. Broke with something in the nature of a rude humour in his eye.

"You are a wonderful sex," he said, "for the climacterics. You will not be denied your births, marriages, and funerals. The place is infested with women."

"Emotion is the food on which we thrive," said Mrs. Broke. "Men, I know, are different. I believe they have a positive dislike of the precious stuff upon which we wax and grow fat."

Her words were accompanied by a laugh which somehow went against the doctor's grain.

"I shall look to see the grandfather here before the night is over," said Dr. Walker in his blunt fashion. "What a rare stroke of luck if it be a boy !"

"I think a little good fortune, one way or another, is about due to us."

"Yes, I think it is."

He looked into the face of the woman before him with great keenness. That laugh of hers jarred more than ever upon his ear. Also he saw there other things that jarred upon him.

"I should like you to go away for a bit," he said. "Go away to-morrow to the South of France for a month or two. Take Mr. Broke. You are both a little run down. You want change and a rest. You have been going through rather too much both of you."

"We shall see," she said, gently putting him off. "What do you think of the poor thing upstairs?"

Dr. Walker compressed his lips.

"She is a very frail bit of a thing," he said.

"Is she not just the wick of a farthing candle that might easily go out?"

"It is surprising how seldom they do. Dame Nature, after all, is a prudent soul. I have seen her keep many a faint candle burning. When the pinch comes we can look to her to make a great effort for her children."

"But I fear for this poor child on account of her husband. She has a terrible prepossession."

"Yes, that is our difficulty. Nothing could be more unfortunate. But I think we can be of good faith."

With this final expression of the doctor's belief in the mighty mother, the sacred rites began upstairs and down. Soft-footed women flitted hither and thither with flushed and grave faces. Many were the mysterious whispers that were interchanged, many the mysterious orders given. The nurse became a personage indeed. The bedroom, the sitting-room, the back kitchen trembled at her eagle glance. When she lifted up her autocratic nose, and sniffed the air, and declared that "something was burning" she verged upon the sublime. It was not so much that a reference was conveyed to the array of shawls, blankets and long clothes which had been ranged on the backs of chairs in front of the sitting-room fire, as the detachment of mind that was argued in this perception of a mundane detail in the stress of an event that made an epoch in the life of the race. It was as much an evidence of a vast experience, and as fully betrayed the

“Old Parliamentary Hand,” as the incredible coolness of the late Mr. Gladstone, who was wont to startle the neophytes of the British Parliament by producing a volume of Homer in crises hardly less momentous in the history of nations.

These orgies continued to go on, and were carried to great lengths. Queer foods and invalid concoctions appeared on the table in the little sitting-room, and strange emblems of science as applied to medicine came on it too. The *cénacle* of women flitting round them grew even more rapt in its responsiveness to the exigencies of the moment, when first the doctor and then the nurse went upstairs with silent tread and solemn.

It happened at a time when Mrs. Broke and Delia stood a little apart in an angle formed by the wall and the chimney-piece, helping one another in the manipulation of linen, and Miss Sparrow was a few paces from them holding a saucepan of milk over the fire, that the outer door was seen to revolve on its hinges in a manner so soundless that it looked like mystery. In the next instant the wind swept a gush of rain into the cosy room. Obscure sounds of shuffling feet came with it. The door was opened wider, and the dank figure of a man was outlined in the gloom of the threshold. Those who saw this strange apparition through the tempered glow of the lamp and the firelight knew it for that of a man large and burly. There was an odd stoop in the shoulders. His hair was almost white and his face was grey.

He lurched into the room with his hands thrust out before him in the manner of one who is blind, or of one groping in a dark room. But the eyes seemed to have not a spark of consciousness. It was as though he knew not where he was or what he did. He groped his way past the table to the most distant corner of the room, where there chanced to be an empty chair.

Spellbound the three witnesses stood to watch. They were fascinated by the obtrusion of this uncanny presence. It was not until the man sat down with an audible heaviness on the chair in the corner, plucked from his head the square-crowned felt hat from which the wet was running in a stream, and laid it on the floor beside his box-cloth gaiters, and

then proceeded to rest his chin on his hand which rested in turn on the knob of an ash stick, that the power of volition returned to those who saw.

The old aunt was the first to recover it. She left the saucepan of milk, which was already beginning to bubble, on the fire, and crept with a stealthy terror to the side of Mrs. Broke. Very timidly she took hold of her dress. It was like the act of a child when it really believes that a bear or a giant has walked into the nursery. Shuddering in every vein she pressed her face against the ample person of her protectress; and when of a sudden the neglected milk surged in the saucepan and boiled over with a mighty hiss into the fire, she fixed a more convulsive clutch upon Mrs. Broke.

Delia's act was of a different nature. When by force of gazing the fact penetrated her numbly that the man who groped his way into the little room was her father, she tore her eyes from that huddled shape in the very instant that she realized who it was. Without hurry, with a kind of deliberation even, she went at once into a small adjoining room, where the maids her mother had sent from the house were performing various duties.

Some little time passed before the old woman was sufficiently mistress of herself to loose her convulsive grip of Mrs. Broke. Even when ruefully she proceeded to pick the burning saucepan off the fire, she was still trembling violently. Not once as she refilled the saucepan with milk from a bowl that stood on the table did she dare to let her eyes stray in the direction of the ogre seated opposite to her, with his chin resting on his stick.

Nor did Mrs. Broke allow her eyes to stray towards that presence. Indeed, the power of vision seemed no longer to be hers. Something had happened, but what it was she did not know. Broke was in that room, but there was nothing to tell her how he had come or what had brought him there.

In a little while she became aware of another pregnant fact. Delia had quitted the room. That was a simple, definite, lucid piece of knowledge; there was a kind of refreshment in its freedom from complexity. It was a thing

she could understand ; it cost neither blood nor tears to acquire its meaning. Here at least was a thing for reason to apprehend without being overthrown in the process.

She went to the next room where Delia was. It caused a nerve to jump in her to find that the face of her youngest daughter had relapsed into that hardness which transcended even the coldness of passion which that morning had struck her to her knees. Now, however, she had passed beyond that range of emotion of which fear may be a phase. All that she felt, all that she saw, all that she did had lost the sanction of personality, the impetus of entity. Very dimly, if at all, did she know what ends were about to be served, or by the aid of what universal principle events were shaping themselves.

“ Delia, I hold you to your promise.”

“ There was a condition under which it was to be entered upon,” said Delia, with sombre mournfulness.

“ Yes, I will fulfil it.”

She asked one of the maids to procure writing materials for her use. She then said to the other :

“ Please go back to the house as quickly as you can, tell Reynolds to have the horses put in the brougham, and you are to return with it at once.”

As soon as the maid had gone she sat down and wrote the following :

“ In the name of your wife I ask you to come here at once in the company of the bearer.—Jane Sophia Broke.”

As her mother was in the act of addressing the envelope a look of pitying incredulity came into Delia's face.

In the interval of rather more than half an hour which passed before the brougham arrived, not a word was spoken by any of the persons assembled in the two small rooms on the ground floor. That strange arrival had oppressed the atmosphere with a curious density. The knowledge that a man with a grey face was sitting in that dark corner with his chin resting on his stick seemed to hold them in thrall. At last there was a sound of wheels outside in the rain, and a

little afterwards the maid and Reynolds the coachman came with blinking eyelids into the brightness of the room.

Mrs. Broke gave the letter to Reynolds.

“I want you to take this to the shop of Mr. Porter the bookseller at Cuttisham. It is a small shop in North Street, a few doors out of the High Street. Please ask for Mr. Alfred Porter, and give him this letter yourself personally. He will return with you here to this cottage ; and please let me urge upon you, Reynolds, that this is a matter of very great importance.”

As Reynolds went forth upon his mission the look of pitying incredulity was seen upon the face of Delia for the second time.

Silence came again. Delia remained in the inner room out of the sight of her father, whose own posture had not changed. Presently Mrs. Broke ascended to the chamber above ; and when she did so, Miss Sparrow, not daring to be left alone with that uncanny presence in the corner, deserted the baby-linen and fled to Delia for security. Soon afterwards Mrs. Broke came downstairs again and beckoned to the old woman, but did not speak. She then gathered the articles in front of the sitting-room fire into an armful, and carried them upstairs. The old woman followed meekly in her wake.

CHAPTER XLVII

THE TWO VOICES

IN the tiny sitting-room there came another interval devoid of sound, devoid of incident. Broke remained in the corner huddled into a grey mass, with his chin still propped on his stick. He remained motionless and alone. Not once had he moved. His eyes were wide, but appeared to be glazed a faded violet colour, like those of a dog that is blind. They stared like eyes of glass out of a statue ; for all their look of intensity they could see nothing. The sounds of a small clock ticking on the chimney-piece were to be heard distinctly, but to Broke they were not audible. They were merged in the beating of his heart. Everything was very still and vague. There were occasional fierce gushes of rain driven by the wind against the window panes of the cottage. He mistook them for waves of blood breaking over the walls of his mind. Outside, in the abyss of the winter evening, there was not a star. There was nothing, not so much as a dark pool of water or the shadow of a gaunt tree, by which time and place could be identified.

The night was a void, but one not so great as that of the spirit of the man who sat in the corner of the bright room with his chin on his stick. Time and place had even less embodiment in him. He might be on earth a withered oak tree, a fallen leaf, a blade of grass bruised to death by the hand of winter ; or he might be in space, a disembodied spirit wafted to Elysium along the clouds of eternity. There was not a shade of recognition remaining in him of a sense of entity. He had no familiar evidence of life, hardly of being. He was a nebulous mechanism, whose brain was a sea, whose

clay was a fire ; an impotent mechanism compounded mysteriously, irrelevantly, of the two prime elements, wrought, with equal mystery and irrelevance no less, into a crude bodiless shape whose end and beginning was darkness and torment. Beyond that elemental knowledge there was nothing to know.

Suddenly a far-off sound was heard in some remote purlieu of his being. It surmounted the ticking of the clock, it surmounted the mighty pulsations of his heart, it surmounted the spatter of the rain against the windows which he still mistook for waves of blood breaking over the walls of his mind. It was a wail as of a wind drawn fine, a wind crooning across the fields of space from the outer verge of eternity. It was so faint that it seemed to have crept for æons across the sterile wastes of time. It rose and fell, but repetition did not make it more real. It was uncanny, eerie, and monotonous ; it made an effect of unreason in a condition of exquisite sanity.

As this little voice issued from the back of the infinite, without coming nearer into human ken, it seemed to acquire a certain quality. Time and space became possible ; strange, external things were slowly shadowed forth. A dull yellow disc appeared before his eyes. At first he thought it was the moon, but it seemed too bright ; and then the sun, but it did not seem bright enough. He then grew alive to the fact that it was a lamp on a table. He grasped the knowledge that he was sitting in a room. Soon he realized that the illusion he had had of a disembodied spirit reclining upon a cloud had been produced by his chin resting upon his stick.

It was now that another element was introduced into this frantic struggle to re-establish a sense of entity. The faint voice that had made it possible had been weird and eerie and not unsolemn, such was its suggestion of having journeyed long through time and having travelled far. But now there rose up a competing voice that was neither weird nor solemn. Its effect was so ridiculous that it would not have been tolerated in a harlequinade. It was the lusty crying of a child.

At such a moment the intrusion of such a voice was obscene. That robust, that absolutely common and lucid sound in conjunction with the wail right away from the outer verge of eternity was too incongruous for reason to accept. It was altogether beyond bathos, it was mockery. It was a paradox invented by a devil to affront a logical and delicate human ear. Reason was staggered, but the hideous duet gained in power. The wail still rose and fell, crooning in mid-air from the back of eternity; the infant cries grew more lusty to the ear. Harrowed by a sense of being in hell, the listener made a superhuman effort to hold on to his wits. He was able at last, in the manner of a sleeper who struggles to awake in the midst of foul dreams, to project his consciousness beyond the flaming disc of yellow light. He was able to make out his wife beyond it, seated in shadow. She had a bundle in her arms.

The sight of her, however, did nothing to lessen his sense of torment. The awful duet still went on. It grew more and more intolerable. The one noise, certainly the more human, the more natural, seemed to come from the bundle his wife held in her arms. It was shrill, lusty, irrelevant, but at least it had its place in nature. But why it should pit itself against that other sound he did not know. The effect of them blended in chorus was not to be borne, it was horrible beyond belief. The endurance of no human person could sanction such an incongruity. If that menace to sanity did not cease soon he felt he must go mad.

Do what he would, however, the two voices continued to make his reason totter. There was a quality in that high and thin wail which had struck the first effect of unreason in him, which yet so strangely had restored to him the kingdom of the mind, that was not to be compared to any known thing in earth or heaven. It had an analogy to winds far-off, rippling the branches of the eerie forests of the moon. It was like a mild little voice hanging in mid-air, a dryad mourning. Now and then the note had something in common with the cry of an animal. And yet in essence it was like none of these. For the prevailing quality was something metallic, something mechanical, which seemed to invest the

very core of these cadences: an ordered recurrence, a regulated coming and going, a rising and falling, an incredibly even repetition of its timbre that had nothing in common with the human, the divine, the natural, the supernatural, so far as the senses of man had been evolved to apprehend them.

Broke's bleeding nerves recoiled from it in horror again and again.

"It is damnation!" they seemed to complain to one another. "It is damnation!"

CHAPTER XLVIII

THE SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST: THE CURTAIN FALLS

THAT, indeed, was the only description it would bear. It was a piece of sheer diabolism. It was an elaborate yet brutal sequence of discords, a symphony of music as they might understand it in hell. Remote as it was it could overthrow all other sounds. The bundle that was so near emitted natural infant cries; but distinct as they were they could not drown those weaker sounds that were so far away.

The duet between the two voices went on and on. Broke again ceased to be conscious of anything save the fashion of their blending. It grew higher and higher; it rose more insistent; but the thinner note was ever dominant. After a time the nearer one grew less. The human cries from the bundle subsided into a troubled exhaustion. Languorous sobs were shaken among and dispersed in the strident outcry; gradually it grew intermittent, presently it ceased. The unholy wail suspended in the firmament had nothing then to dispute its empire. Again Broke had the desire to crush his hands into his ears. He could hardly sit in his chair. At last he could endure it no more. He jerked up his head in the startled manner of a stag when it catches the wind of its hunters.

"That damned noise?" he demanded imperiously.
"What is it?"

"That is the mother."

The reply caused a faint ray of light to dawn in his face. His hands froze tighter to the knob of his stick. He settled his chin more firmly upon it.

The nurse came down the stairs softly. Mrs. Broke gave the stupefied bundle of life into her arms. As she did so the nurse shook her head.

"Poor thing!" she whispered dolefully.

Tears gathered slowly, one at a time, in her rather hard eyes.

The sound of wheels was heard again outside in the rain. Mrs. Broke raised her head and stood erect. Her listening ears could detect, even through the tumult of the night, the creakings of a vehicle as it drew up at the gate of the little garden. She strained to catch a footfall on the gravel path. The old faintly ironical smile flitted round her lips for an instant, but in the next her face had grown as haggard as that of Broke. Under the lamp it shone livid. She moved to the door and opened it. A spatter of rain was cast suddenly upon her face as in the case of a few hours before, but the engines of her heart and brain no longer needed it for refreshment. There was a high exaltation in her. She stood bareheaded, and shaded with her hand the rain and gross darkness from her eyes and peered into the storm to discern the outlines of the man she had come to seek.

She called a name softly, but there came no response. It was too dark to make out what was at the bottom of the garden. There was not a sound except the hiss of the rain and the mournful noise of the wind sobbing and screaming in the upper branches of the wood behind and above the cottage. She continued to stand expectant, but no form appeared before her on the garden path. She called the name again, but she stood alone.

At last was borne to her a footfall on the gravel. Almost at once a vague shape was evolved out of the night. A man with his great-coat turned up to his ears, and the peak of his cap pulled down over his face until only the tip of his chin and nose were visible, confronted the woman on the threshold. He was as gaunt as a drenched sparrow, the water was dripping from his shoulders.

"I knew you would come," the woman breathed softly.

"I couldn't find the gate in the darkness. And the wind and rain are horrible."

She hastened to lead him within and close the door, for every moment the wind was threatening to extinguish the lamp on the table.

The man moved quickly into the light and wiped his feet very carefully on the door-mat. He took off his cap, and his eyes fell on the nurse, who was rocking the infant in her arms, with an occasional tear dripping from her eyes on to the blanket in which the child was wrapped.

Mrs. Broke led the man through the small room to the still smaller one beyond in which Delia was seated. In his progress he did not appear to notice that a grey huddle of a man was seated in the farthest corner of the room through which he had passed.

Upon the man's entrance Delia rose, but he did not look at her.

Mrs. Broke closed the door that communicated with the other room.

"You must take off your wet overcoat," she said.

"Thank you, I will."

Delia helped him to remove it. Her hands were very cold, her face was the colour of snow. During the moment in which she helped him to take off his coat her face changed to scarlet and then as suddenly grew white again. Her eyes were dark with bewilderment. Her husband kept his eyes averted from her, although there was an instant in which he took her arm in a grip that had a slightly authoritative caress in it.

"Won't you sit down?" said Mrs. Broke.

"No, I think not."

She found that his voice and the measure of his self-effacement were making her strong. They had seemed to banish any suggestion of abnormality in their meeting.

"I must first make the purpose clear for which I sent for you this evening. But before I do so let me thank you for coming. I can only say that had I not formed the highest opinion of your character that one person can form of another's, I could not have asked you to come here."

The man bent his face a little. A look of pain showed upon the wrung forehead.

“ My object in asking you to come here to-night is that you may undertake the task of reconciling a father and daughter. It is by you alone that it can be done. The grave crime that was committed against you, your wife cannot forgive. But at the entreaty of her mother, she has consented to make your perfect magnanimity the sole condition of her forgiveness. You have only to withhold it ; you have only to make one reservation ; you have only to impose a single condition, and they can never be reconciled. If you are incapable of such an action I shall not respect you less ; if it is given to you to achieve it you will have the thanks of a woman, old and poor. Perhaps I have no right to ask it ; perhaps it is more than one person should ask of another. But as a wife and a mother I ask it. I ask it in the name of the children that may one day be yours. As an old and poor woman who has borne many, I ask it on my knees.”

In this appeal was an abasement so complete that it brought tears to the man's eyes. Without a glance at him to whom the appeal was made the unhappy woman covered her face with her hands. There was a silence in which she stood shivering, in which her heart seemed to shrink, in which her heaving sides seemed to contract.

Suddenly the man placed a hand on each of her shoulders with a gentleness that was extraordinary.

“ You will lead her to him ? ”

“ As you wish.”

A strange smile twisted the wrung face.

The woman breathed heavily.

“ A man—a living man—I hear the voice of a living man ! ”

As these words were spoken she raised one of his hands in both her own, and it felt the fervour of her lips. A single tear out of her eyes fell upon it.

In the next moment she had gone back to the other room. Broke still kept the attitude he had occupied ever since he had come there. To the grey of his cheeks had succeeded the pallor of death. The nurse sat at the side of the fire rocking the quiescent child in her arms. The wail upstairs

had ceased. The doctor was seen descending the stairs. His strong face was very grave and composed. He came softly to the side of Mrs. Broke.

"It is over," he said in her ear.

She held her heart.

The doctor turned to the infant sleeping in the arms of the nurse. He drew the blanket gently aside and looked at it.

"A fine boy," he said.

His comment awoke no echo of response in the unhappy woman shivering by his side. His eyes went across the room to where Broke still huddled with his chin resting on his stick.

"Ha! there is the grandfather! Does he know?"

"Tell him," said the unhappy woman.

The doctor turned towards him.

"A fine boy, Mr. Broke," he said, with a native heartiness in his voice.

The direct manner of the address did something to lift Broke from his stupor. For the first time he took his head out of his hands, and in the act the stick fell with a clatter to the floor.

"A fine boy," the doctor repeated in his bluff voice.

"Eh?" said Broke.

His tone was hoarse, querulous, bewildered. There seemed to be some kind of significance in the words of the doctor, but somehow his mind could not seize it.

"A fine boy," said the doctor yet again, and a little proudly: "It is a strange providence that watches over you old families, don't you think?"

Not a glimmer of comprehension appeared in the eyes of the grandfather. They were stretched dully upon the lamp. The sweat was springing from his pores.

"The noise," he muttered. "That damned noise. Why has it stopped?"

"We couldn't save her."

"Hey!" said Broke. He placed a hand behind his ear and bent forward in the feebly querulous manner of a very aged man who is deaf.

The doctor repeated his words.

"I don't understand," said Broke feebly. "I—I want to know about that damned noise."

"I cannot recall a more painful or difficult case in my experience. We had no chance from the first."

A vague comprehension was seen to creep into the grey face of the grandfather. His massive frame was suddenly shaken and convulsed. His wife lifted the bundle out of the arms of the nurse and bore it to him. Mutely he lifted his piteous face to hers.

"Edmund," she said, calling him by name.

The sound of the familiar calm voice was, as always, a source of strength and consolation to him. Something of the stupor was banished from his spirit, something of the palsy was taken from his limbs. He extended both his arms towards his wife with a gesture of thirsting eagerness. She tucked the sleeping fragment of life firmly within them. He gathered it slowly on to his knees.

She then withdrew to the room adjoining.

"Now!" she breathed from the threshold.

Delia and her husband were seated at the table side by side, but at the summons the young man rose at once to his feet. Delia followed his action with dull, sceptical, rather terrified eyes.

He raised her very gently by the arm. Taking her then by the hand, he led the way into the other room. She yielded to him completely, but with terror and incredulity ever growing in her face.

Broke was discovered in a corner with a shapeless mass of blanket on his knees. His face was hardly recognizable, it was so wet and grey. He lifted it at the approach of his daughter and her husband; he had expected to see his wife. A look of bewilderment, like that in the eyes of his daughter, came upon him, but it passed almost at once. It was succeeded by an expression that was incomprehensible, that had no meaning. His mouth grew loose and weak. His right arm tightened about the precious burden it encompassed. Suddenly his left arm was seen to be extended; and at the same instant

a dreadful agony seemed to pass over and to shatter his frame.

At once the man led Delia to where the hand of her father awaited her. But even when she had come to him the power was not in her to yield her hand to his. She stood mute as a stone. Her fingers were placed in the limp thing that was offered her. The curious weakness of its pressure helped her to yield a little. The man returned at once to the room out of which he had come and closed the door, leaving Mrs. Broke to stand and gaze with eyes that were going blind.

Upstairs sat the old woman by the side of the bed, desolate and without tears, nursing the dead hand of her niece. Downstairs sat Broke clasping his man-child with one arm, with the other his daughter.

At this point those lovers of honest laughter sitting in Heaven rubbed their knees and roared lustily. The curtain was rung down ; and the God of Irony, the author of the little piece that had been performed with such feeling and taste by this intelligent body of players, leant forward in his box to bow his acknowledgments. Again and again he deferred to the applause that was showered upon him from every part of the Olympian Theatre. For all concerned the evening had been a great success.

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